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MISSIS FLINDERS

by

Tess Slesinger

"HOME you go!" Miss Kane, nodding, in her white nurse's dress, stood for a moment—she would catch a breath of air—in the hospital door; "and thank you again for the stockings, you needn't have bothered"—drew a sharp breath and turning, dismissed Missis Flinders from the hospital, smiling, dismissed her forever from her mind.

So Margaret Flinders stood next to her basket of fruit on the hospital steps; both of them waiting, a little shame-faced in the sudden sunshine, and in no hurry to leave the hospital—no hurry at all. It would be nicer to be alone, Margaret thought, glancing at the basket of fruit which stood respectable and a little silly on the stone step (the candy-bright apples were blushing caricatures of Jean; Jean's explanation that he was a good boy: Jean's comfort, not hers). Flowers she could have left behind (for the nurses, in the room across the hall where they made tea at night); books she could have slipped into her suit-case; but fruit—Jean's gift, Jean's guilt, man's tribute to the Missis in the hospital—must be eaten; a half-eaten basket of fruit (she had tried to leave it: Missis Butter won't you... Missis Wiggam wouldn't you like... But Missis Butter had aplenty of her own thank you, and Missis Wiggam said she couldn't hold acids after a baby)—a half-eaten basket of fruit, in times like these, cannot be left to rot.

Down the street Jean was running, running, after a taxi. He was going after the taxi for her; it was for her sake he ran; yet this minute that his back was turned he stole for his relief and spent in running away, his buttocks crying guilt. And don't hurry, don't hurry, she said to them; I too am better off alone.

The street stretched in a long white line very finally away from the hospital, the hospital where Margaret Flinders (called there so solemnly

Missis) had been lucky enough to spend only three nights. It would be four days before Missis Wiggam would be going home to Mister Wiggam with a baby; and ten possibly—the doctors were uncertain, Miss Kane prevaricated—before Missis Butter would be going home to Mister Butter without one. Zig-zagging the street went the children; their cries and the sudden grinding of their skates she had listened to upstairs beside Missis Butter for three days. Some such child had she been—for the styles in children had not changed—a lean child gliding solemnly on skates and grinding them viciously at the nervous feet of grown-ups. Smile at these children she would not or could not; yet she felt on her face that smile fixed, painful and frozen that she had put there, on waking from ether three days back, to greet Jean. The smile spoke to the retreating buttocks of Jean: I don't need you; the smile spoke formally to life: thanks, I'm not having any. Not so the child putting the heels of his skates together Charlie Chaplin-wise and describing a scornful circle on the widest part of the sidewalk. Not so a certain little girl (twenty years back) skating past the wheels of autos, pursuing life in the form of a ball so red! so gay! better death than to turn one's back and smile over one's shoulder at life!

Upstairs Missis Butter must still be writhing with her poor caked breasts. The bed that had been hers beside Missis Butter's was empty now; Miss Kane would be stripping it and Joe would come in bringing fresh sheets. Whom would they put in beside Missis Butter, to whom would she moan and boast all night about the milk in her breasts that was turning, she said, into cheese?

Now Jean was coming back, jogging sheepishly on the running-board of a taxi, he had run away to the end of his rope and now was returning penitent, his eyes dog-like searching her out where she stood on the hospital steps (did they rest with complacence on the basket of fruit, his gift?), pleading with her, Didn't I get the taxi fast? like an anxious little boy. She stood with that smile on her face that hurt like too much ice-cream. Smile and smile; for she felt like a fool, she had walked open-eyed smiling into the trap *(Don't wriggle, Missis, I might injure you for life, Miss Kane had said cheerfully)* and felt the spring only when it was too late, when she waked from ether and knew like the thrust of a knife what

she had ignored before. *Whatever did you do it for, Missis Flinders Missis Butter was always saying; if there's nothing the matter with your insides—doesn't your husband... and Won't you have some fruit, Missis, Butter, her calm reply: meaning, My husband gave me this fruit so what right have you to doubt that my husband...* Her husband who now stumbled up the steps to meet her; his eyes he had sent ahead, but something in him wanted not to come, tripped his foot as he hurried up the steps.

"Take my arm, Margaret," he said. "Walk slowly," he said. The bitter pill of taking help, of feeling weakly grateful stuck in her throat. Jean's face behind his glasses was tense like the face of an amateur actor in the role of a strike-leader. That he was inadequate for the part he seemed to know. And if he felt shame, shame in his own eyes, she could forgive him; but if it was only guilt felt man-like in her presence, a guilt which he could drop off like a damp shirt, if he was putting it all off on her for being a woman! "The fruit, Jean!" she said; "you've forgotten the fruit." "The fruit can wait," he said magnanimously.

He handed her into the taxi as though she were a package marked glass—something, she thought, not merely troublesomely womanly, but ladylike. "Put your legs up on the seat," he said. "I don't want to, Jean." *Goodbye Missis Butter* Put your legs up on the seat. I don't want to—*better luck next time Missis Butter* Put your legs *I can't make out our window, Missis Butter* Put your "All right, it will be nice and uncomfortable." (She put her legs up on the seat.) *Goodbye Missis But...* "Nothing I say is right," he said. "It's good with the legs up," she said brightly.

Then he was up the steps agile and sure after the fruit. And down again, the basket swinging with affected carelessness, arming him, till he relinquished it modestly to her outstretched hands. Then he seated himself on the little seat, the better to watch his woman and his woman's fruit; and screwing his head round on his neck said irritably to the man who had been all his life on the wrong side of the glass pane: "Charles Street!"

"Hadn't you better ask him to please drive slowly?" Margaret said.

"I was just going to," he said bitterly.

"And drive slowly," he shouted over his shoulder.

The driver's name was Carl C. Strite. She could see Carl Strite glance cannily back at the hospital; Greenway Maternity Home; pull his lever with extreme delicacy as though he were stroking the neck of a horse. There was a small roar—and the hospital glided backward: its windows ran together like the windows of a moving train; a spurt—watch out for those children on skates!—and the car was fairly started down the street.

Goodbye Missis Butter I hope you get a nice roommate in my place, I hope you won't find that Mister B let the ice-pan flow over again—and give my love to the babies when Miss Kane stops them in the door for you to wave at—goodbye Missis Butter, really goodbye.

Carl Strite (was he thinking maybe of his mother, an immigrant German woman she would have been, come over with a shawl on her head and worked herself to skin and bone so the kids could go to school and turn out good Americans—and what had it come to, here he was a taxi-driver, and what taxi-drivers didn't know! what in the course of their lackeys' lives they didn't put up with, fall in with! well, there was one decent thing left in Carl Strite, he knew how to carry a woman home from a maternity hospital) drove softly along the curb... and the eyes of his honest puzzled gangster's snout photographed as 'Your Driver' looked dimmed as though the glory of woman were too much for them, in a moment the weak cruel baby's mouth might blubber. Awful to lean forward and tell Mr. Strite he was laboring under a mistake. *Missis Wiggam's freckled face when she heard that Missis Butter's roommate... maybe Missis Butter's baby had been born dead but anyway she had had a baby... whatever did you do it for Missis Flind...*

"Well, patient," Jean began, tentative, jocular (bored? perturbed? behind his glasses?).

"How does it feel, Tidbit?" he said in a new, small voice.

Hurt and hurt this man, a feeling told her. He is a man, he could have made you a woman. "What's a D and C between friends?" she said. "Nobody at the hospital gave a damn about my little illegality."

"Well, but I do," he protested like a short man trying to be tall.

She turned on her smile; the bright silly smile that was eating

up her face.

Missis Butter would be alone now with no one to boast to about her pains except Joe who cleaned the corridors and emptied bed-pans—and thought Missis Butter was better than an angel because although she had incredible golden hair she could wise-crack like any brunette. Later in the day the eight-day mothers wobbling down the corridors for their pre-nursing constitutional would look in and talk to her; for wasn't Missis Butter their symbol and their pride, the one who had given up her baby that they might have theirs (for a little superstition is inevitable in new mothers, and it was generally felt that there must be one dead baby in a week's batch at any decent hospital) for whom they demanded homage from their visiting husbands? for whose health they asked the nurses each morning second only to asking for their own babies? That roommate of yours was a funny one, Missis Wiggam would say. Missis Wiggam was the woman who said big breasts weren't any good: here she was with a seven-pound baby and not a drop for it (here she would open the negligee Mister Wiggam had given her not to shame them before the nurses, and poke contemptuously at the floppy parts of herself within) while there was Missis Butter with no baby but a dead baby and her small breasts caking because there was so much milk in them for nothing but a... Yes, that Missis Flinders was sure a funny one, Missis Butter would agree.

'Funny ones,' she and Jean, riding home with numb faces and a basket of fruit between them—past a park, past a museum, past elevated pillars—intellectuals they were, bastards, changelings... giving up a baby for books they might never write, giving up a baby for economic freedom which meant that two of them would work in offices instead of one of them only, giving up a baby for intellectual freedom which meant that they smoked their cigarettes bitterly and looked out of the windows of a taxi onto streets and people and stores and hated them all. 'We'd go soft, Jean had said; 'we'd go bourgeois.' Yes, with diapers drying on the radiators, bottles wrapped in flannel, the grocery-man getting to know one too well—yes, they would go soft, they might slump and start liking people, they might weaken and forgive stupidity, they might yawn and

forget to hate. 'Funny ones,' class-straddlers, intellectuals, tight-rope-walking somewhere in the middle (how long could they hang on without falling to one side or the other? one more war? one more depression?); intellectuals with habits generated from the right and tastes inclined to the left. Afraid to perpetuate themselves, were they? Afraid of anything that might loom so large in their personal lives as to outweigh other considerations? Afraid, maybe, of a personal life?

"Oh give me another cigarette," she said.

And still the taxi, with its burden of intellectuals and their inarticulate fruit-basket, its motherly, gangsterly, inarticulate driver, its license plates and its photographs all so very official, jogged on; past Harlem now; past fire-escapes loaded with flower-pots and flapping clothes; dingy windows opening to the soot-laden air blown in by the elevated roaring down its tracks. Past Harlem and through 125th Street: stores and wise-cracks, Painless Dentists, cheap florists; Eighth Avenue, boarded and plastered, concealing the subway that was reaching its laborious birth beneath. But Eighth Avenue was too jouncy for Mr. Strite's precious burden of womanhood (who was reaching passionately for a cigarette); he cut through the park, and they drove past quiet walks on which the sun had brought out babies as the fall rains give birth to worms.

"But ought you to smoke so much, so soon after—so soon?" Jean said, not liking to say so soon after what. His hand held the cigarettes out to her, back from her.

"They do say smoking's bad for child-birth," she said calmly, and with her finger-tips drew a cigarette from his reluctant hand.

And tapping down the tobacco on the handle of the fruit-basket she said, "But we've got the joke on them there, we have." (Hurt and hurt this man, her feeling told her; he is a man and could have made you a woman.)

"Pretty nice girl, you are," Jean said, striking and striking at the box with his match.

"This damn taxi's shaking you too much," he said suddenly, bitter and contrite.

But Mr. Strite was driving like an angel. He handled his car as

though it were a baby-carriage. Did he think maybe it had turned out with her the way it had with Missis Butter? I could have stood it better, Missis Butter said, if they hadn't told me it was a boy. And me with my fourth little girl, Missis Wiggam had groaned (but proudly, proudly); why I didn't even want to see it when they told me. But Missis Butter stood it very well, and so did Missis Wiggam. They were a couple of good bitches; and what if Missis Butter had produced nothing but a dead baby this year, and what if Missis Wiggam would bring nothing to Mister Wiggam but a fourth little girl this year—why there was next year and the year after, there was the certain little world from grocery-store to kitchen, there were still Mister Butter and Mister Wiggam who were both (Missis Wiggam and Missis Butter vied with each other) just *crazy* about babies. Well, Mister Flinders is different, she had lain there thinking (he cares as much for his unborn books as I for my unborn babies); and wished she could have the firm assurance they had in 'husbands,' coming as they did year after year away from them for a couple of weeks, just long enough to bear them babies either dead-ones or girl-ones... good bitches they were: there was something lustful beside smug in their pride in being 'Missis.' Let Missis Flinders so much as let out a groan because a sudden pain grew too big for her groins, let her so much as murmur because the sheets were hot beneath her—and Missis Butter and Missis Wiggam in the security of their maternity-sorority exchanged glances of amusement: SHE don't know what pain is, look at what's talking about PAIN...

"Mr. Strite flatters us," she whispered, her eyes smiling straight and hard into Jean's. (Hurt and hurt...)

"And why does that give you so much pleasure?" He dragged the words as though he were pounding them out with two fingers on the typewriter.

The name without the pain—she thought to say; and did not say. All at once she lost her desire to punish him; she no more wanted to 'hurt this man' for he was no more man than she was woman. She would not do him the honor of hurting him. She must reduce him as she felt herself reduced. She must cut out from him what made him a man, as she had

let be cut out from her what would have made her a woman. He was no man: he was a dried-up intellectual rabbit; he was sterile; empty and hollow as she was.

Missis Butter lying up on her pillow would count over to Missis Wiggam the fine points of her tragedy: how she had waited two days to be delivered of a dead baby; how it wouldn't have been so bad if the doctor hadn't said it was a beautiful baby with platinum-blond hair exactly like hers (and hers bleached unbelievably, but never mind, Missis Wiggam had come to believe in it like Joe and Mister Butter, another day and Missis Flinders herself, intellectual sceptic though she was, might have been convinced); and how they would pay the last instalment on—what a baby-carriage, Missis Wiggam, you'd never believe me!—and sell it second-hand for half its worth. I know when I was caught with my first, Missis Wiggam would take up the story her mouth had been open for. And that Missis Flinders was sure a funny one...

But I am not such a funny one, Margaret wanted, beneath her bright and silly smile, behind her cloud of cigarette smoke (for Jean had given in; the whole package sat gloomily on Margaret's lap) to say to them; even though in my 'crowd' the girls keep the names they were born with, even though we sleep for a little variety with one another's husbands, even though I forget as often as Jean—Mister Flinders to you—to empty the pan under the ice-box. Still I too have known my breasts to swell and harden, I too have been unable to sleep on them for their tenderness to weight and touch, I too have known what it is to undress slowly and imagine myself growing night to night... I knew this for two months, my dear Missis Wiggam; I had this strange joy for two months, my dear Missis Butter. But there was a night last week, my good ladies, which Mister Flinders and I spent in talk—and damn fine talk, if you want to know, talk of which I am proud, and talk not one word of which you, with your grocery-and-baby minds, could have understood; in a regime like this, Jean said, it is a terrible thing to have a baby—it means the end of independent thought and the turning of everything into a scheme for making money; and there must be institutions such as there are in Russia, I said, for taking care of the babies and their mothers; why in a time like

this, we both said, to have a baby would be suicide—goodbye to our plans, goodbye to our working out of schemes for each other and the world—our courage would die, our hopes concentrate on the sordid business of keeping three people alive, one of whom would be a burden and an expense for twenty years... And then we grew drunk for a minute making up the silliest names that we could call it if we had it—and what a tough little thing it is, I said, look, look, how it hangs on in spite of its loving mother jumping off tables and broiling herself in hot water... until Jean, frightened at himself, washed his hands of it: we mustn't waste any more time, the sooner these things are done the better. And I as though the ether cap had already been clapped to my nose, agreed off-handedly. That night I did not pass my hands contentedly over my hard breasts; that night I gave no thought to the nipples grown suddenly brown and competent; I packed, instead, my suitcase: I filled it with all the white clothes I own. Why are you taking white clothes to the hospital, Jean said to me. I laughed. Why did I? White, for a bride; white, for a corpse; white, for a woman who refuses to be a woman...

"Are you all right, Margaret?" (They were out now, safely out on Fifth Avenue, driving placidly past the Plaza where ancient coachmen dozed on the high seats of the last hansoms left in New York).

"Yes, dear," she said mechanically, and forgot to turn on her smile. Pity for him sitting there in stolid inadequacy filled her. He was a man, and he could have made her a woman. She was a woman, and could have made him a man. He was not a man; she was not a woman. In each of them the life-stream flowed to a dead-end.

And all this time that the blood, which Missis Wiggam and Missis Butter stored up preciously in themselves every year to make a baby for their husbands, was flowing freely and wastefully out of Missis Flinders —toward what? would it pile up some day and make a book? would it congeal within her and make a crazy woman?—all this time Mr. Strite, remembering, with his pudgy face, his mother, drove his taxi softly along the curb; no weaving in and out of traffic for Mr. Strite, no spurting at the corners and cheating the side-street traffic, no fine heedless rounding of rival cars for Mr. Strite; he kept his car going at a slow and steady

roll, its nose poked blunt ahead, following the straight and narrow—Mr. Strite knew what it was to carry a woman home from the hospital.

But what in their past had warranted this? She could remember a small girl going from dolls to books, from books with colored pictures to books with frequent conversations; from such books to the books at last that one borrowed from libraries, books built up of solemn text from which you took notes; books which were grey to begin with, but which opened out to your eyes subtle layers of gently shaded colors. (And where in these texts did it say that one should turn one's back on life? Had the coolness of the stone library at college made one afraid? Had the ivy nodding in at the open dormitory windows taught one too much to curl and squat looking out?) And Jean? What book, what professor, what strange idea, had taught him to hunch his shoulders and stay indoors, had taught him to hide behind his glasses? Whence the fear that made him put, in cold block letters, implacably above his desk the sign announcing him "Not at Home" to life?

Missis Flinders, my husband scaled the hospital wall at four o'clock in the morning, frantic I tell you... But I just don't understand you, Missis Flinders (if there's really nothing the matter with your insides), do you understand her, Missis Wiggam, would your husband...? Why goodness, no, Mister Wiggam would sooner...! And there he was, and they asked him, Shall we try an operation, Mister Butter? scaled the wall... shall we try an operation? (Well, you see, we are both writers, my husband and I... well, not exactly *stories)* If there's any risk to Shirley, he said, there mustn't be any risk to Shirley... Missis Wiggam's petulant, childish face, with its sly contentment veiled by what she must have thought a grown-up expression: Mister Wiggam bought me this negligee new, surprised me with it, you know—and generally a saving man, Mister Wiggam, not tight, but with three children—four now! Hetty, he says, I'm not going to have you disgracing us at the hospital this year, he says. Why the nurses will all remember that flannel thing you had Mabel and Suzy and Antoinette in, they'll talk about us behind our backs. (It wasn't that I couldn't make the flannel do again, Missis Butter, it wasn't that at all.) But he says, Hetty, you'll just have a new one this year, he says, and maybe it'll bring

us luck, he says—you know, he was thinking maybe this time we'd have a boy... Well, I just have to laugh at you, Missis Flinders, not *wanting* one, why my sister went to doctors for five years and spent her good money just *trying* to have one... Well, poor Mister Wiggam, so the negligee didn't work, I brought him another little girl—but he didn't say boo to me, though I could see he was disappointed. Hetty, he says, we'll just have another try! oh I thought I'd die, with Miss Kane standing right there you know (though they do say these nurses...); but that's Mister Wiggam all over, he wouldn't stop a joke for a policeman... No, I just can't get over you, Missis Flinders, if Gawd was willing to let you have a baby—and there really isn't anything wrong with your insides?

Jean's basket of fruit standing on the bed-table, trying its level inadequate best, poor pathetic inarticulate intellectual basket of fruit, to comfort, to bloom, to take the place of Jean himself who would come in later with Sam Butter for visiting hour. Jean's too-big basket of fruit standing there, embarrassed. Won't you have a peach, Missis Wiggam (I'm sure they have less acid)? Just try an apple, Missis Butter? Weigh Jean's basket of fruit against Mister Wiggam's negligee for luck, against Mister Butter scaling the wall at four in the morning for the mother of his dead baby. *Please* have a pear, Miss Kane; a banana, Joe? How they spat the seeds from Jean's fruit! How it hurt her when, unknowing, Missis Butter cut away the brown bruised cheek of Jean's bright-eyed, weeping apple! Jean! they scorn me, these ladies. They laugh at me, dear, almost as though I had no 'husband', as though I were a 'fallen woman.' Jean, would you buy me a new negligee if I bore you three daughters? Jean, would you scale the wall if I bore you a dead baby?... Jean, I have an inferiority complex because I am an intellectual... But a peach, Missis Wiggam! can't I possibly tempt you?

To be driving like this at mid-day through New York; with Jean bobbing like an empty ghost (for she could see he was unhappy, as miserable as she, he too had had an abortion) on the side-seat; with a taxi-driver, solicitous, respectful to an ideal, in front; was this the logical end of that little girl she remembered, of that girl swinging hatless across a campus as though that campus were the top of the earth? And

was this all they could give birth to, she and Jean, who had closed up their books one day and kissed each other on the lips and decided to marry?

And now Mr. Strite, with his hand out, was making a gentle right-hand turn. Back to Fifth Avenue they would go, gently rolling, in Mr. Strite's considerate charge. Down Fourteenth Street they would go, past the stores unlike any stores in the world: packed to the windows with imitation gold and imitation embroidery, with imitation men and women coming to stand in the doorways and beckon with imitation smiles; while on the sidewalks streamed the people unlike any other people in the world, drawn from every country, from every stratum, intellectual and social—carrying babies (the real thing, with pinched anaemic faces) and parcels (imitation finery priced low in the glittering stores). There goes a woman, with a flat fat face, will produce five others just like herself, to dine off one-fifth the inadequate quantity her Mister earns today. These are the people not afraid to perpetuate themselves (forbidden to stop, indeed) and they will go on and on (humming 'The best things in life are free') until the bottom of the world is filled with them; and suddenly there will be enough of them to combine their cock-eyed notions and take over the world to suit themselves. While I, while I and my Jean, with our good clear heads will one day go spinning out of the world and leave nothing behind... only diplomas crumbling in the museums...

The mad street ended with Fifth Avenue; was left behind.

They were nearing home. Mr. Strite, who had never seen them before (who would never again, in all likelihood, for his territory was far uptown) was seeing them politely to the door. As they came near home all of Margaret's fear and pain gathered in a knot in her stomach. There would be nothing new in their house; there was nothing to expect; yet she wanted to find something there that she knew she could not find, and surely the house (once so gay, with copies of old paintings, with books which lined the walls from floor to ceiling, with papers and cushions and typewriters) would be suddenly empty and dead, suddenly, for the first time, a group of rooms unalive as rooms with 'For Rent'

still pasted on the windows. And Jean? did he know he was coming home to a place which had suffered no change, but which would be different forever afterward? Jean had taken off his glasses; passed his hand tiredly across his eyes; was sucking now as though he expected relief, some answer, on the tortoise-shell curve which wound around his ear.

Mr. Strite would not allow his cab to cease motion with a jerk. Mr. Strite allowed his cab to slow down even at the corner (where was the delicatessen that sold the only loose ripe olives in the Village), so they rolled softly past No. 14 (where lived Kilgreen who wrote plays which would never be produced and dropped in at break-fast-time for a hair of the dog that bit him the night before); on past the tenement which would eventually be razed to give place to modern three-room apartments with In-a-Dor beds; and then slowly, so slowly that Mr. Strite must surely be an artist as well as a man who had had a mother, drew up and slid to a full stop before No. 20, where two people named Mister and Missis Flinders rented themselves a place to hide from life (both life of the Fifth Avenue variety, and life of the common, or Fourteenth Street, variety: in short, life).

So Jean, with his glasses on his nose once more, descended; held out his hand; Mr. Strite held the door open and his face most modestly averted; and Margaret Flinders painfully and carefully swung her legs down again from the seat and alighted, step by step, with care and confusion. The house was before them; it must be entered. Into the house they must go, say farewell to the streets, to Mr. Strite who had guided them through a tour of the city, to life itself; into the house they must go and hide. It was a fact that Mister Flinders (was he reluctant to come home?) had forgotten his key; that Missis Flinders must delve under the white clothes in her suitcase and find hers; that Mr. Strite, not yet satisfied that his charges were safe, sat watchful and waiting in the front seat of his cab. Then the door gave. Then Jean, bracing it with his foot, held out his hand to Margaret. Then Mr. Strite came rushing up the steps (something had told him his help would be needed again!), rushing up the steps with the basket of fruit hanging on his arm, held out from

his body as though what was the likes of him doing holding a woman's basket just home from the hospital. "You've forgot your fruit, Missis!"

Weakly they glared at the fruit come to pursue them; come to follow them up the stairs to their empty rooms; but that was not fair: come, after all, to comfort them. "You must have a peach," Margaret said.

No, Mr. Strite had never cared for peaches; the skin got in his teeth.

"You must have an apple," Margaret said.

Well, no, he must be getting on uptown. A cigarette (he waved it, deprecated the smoke it blew in the lady's face) was good enough for him.

"But a pear, just a pear," Margaret said passionately.

Mr. Strite wavered, standing on one foot. "Maybe he doesn't want any fruit," said Jean harshly.

"Not want any *fruit!*" cried Margaret gayly, indignantly. Not want any fruit?—ridiculous! Not want the fruit my poor Jean bought for his wife in the hospital? Three days I spent in the hospital, in a Maternity Home, and I produced, with the help of my husband, one basket of fruit (tied with ribbon, pink—for boys). Not want any of our fruit? I couldn't bear it, I couldn't bear it...

Mr. Strite leaned over; put out a hand and gingerly selected a pear —"For luck," he said, managing an excellent American smile. They watched him trot down the steps to his cab, all the time holding his pear as though it were something he would put in a memory book. And still they stayed, because Margaret said foolishly, "Let's see him off;" because she was ashamed, suddenly, before Jean; as though she had cut her hair unbecomingly, as though she had wounded herself in some unsightly way—as though (summing up her thoughts as precisely, as decisively as though it had been done on an adding-machine) she had stripped and revealed herself not as a woman at all, but as a creature who would not be a woman and could not be a man. And then they turned (for there was nothing else to stay for, and on the street and in the sun they were ashamed as though they had been naked)—and went in the door and heard it swing to, pause on its rubbery hinge, and finally click behind them.

THE SAMPLER

by

Ira V. Morris

In a certain store where they sell plum puddings, a number of these delicious articles are laid out in a row during the Christmas season. Here you may select the one which is most to your taste, and you are even allowed to sample the various qualities before coming to a decision.

I have often wondered whether this privilege was not occasionally imposed on by people who had no intention of making a purchase, and one day when my curiosity drove me to ask this question of the shop girl, I learned that it was indeed the case.

"Now there's one old gentleman for instance," she told me, "who comes here almost every week and samples each one of the puddings, though he never buys anything and I supposse he never will. I remember him from last year and the year before that too. Well, let him come if he wants it that bad, say I, and welcome to it. And what's more, I hope there are a lot more stores where he can go and get his share as well. He looks as if he needed it all right, poor fellow, and I guess they can afford it."

She was still speaking when an elderly gentleman limped up to the counter and began scrutinizing the row of puddings with great interest.

"Why, that there's the very party I've been telling you about," whispered the shop girl. "Just you watch him now." And then turning to him: "Would you like to sample them, sir?" she asked. "Here's a spoon for you to use."

The elderly gentleman who, as the novelists say, was poorly but neatly dressed, accepted the spoon and began eagerly to sample one after another of the puddings, only breaking off occasionally to wipe his red eyes with a large torn handkerchief which he drew from the breast pocket of his shoddy overcoat.

"This is quite good," he declared in an absurdly rusty voice of one variety, and when he came to the next, "This is not bad either, but a

trifle too heavy." All the time it was quite evident that he sincerely believed that he might eventually buy one of these puddings, and I am positive that he did not for a moment feel that he was in any way cheating the shop. Poor old chap! Probably he had come down in the world and this sampling was all that was left him from the time when he could afford to come and select his favorite pudding, which he would later carry home under his arm.

Amidst this throng of happy, prosperous-looking Christmas shoppers the little black figure of the old man seemed incongruous and pathetic, and in a sudden burst of benevolence, one of those bursts which so often bring pain instead of joy, I went up to him and said:

"Pardon me, sir, will you do me a favor? Let me purchase you one of these puddings. It would give me such pleasure."

He jumped back as if he had been stung, and the blood rushed into his wrinkled face.

"Excuse me," he said, with more dignity than I would have thought possible considering his shabby appearance, "I do not believe I have the pleasure of knowing you. Undoubtedly you have mistaken me for someone else," and with a quick decision he turned towards the shop girl and said in a loud voice: "Kindly pack me up this one here. I will take it with me," and he pointed at one of the largest and most expensive of the puddings.

In surprise, the girl took down the pudding from its stand and proceeded to make a parcel of it, while he extracted a worn little black pocketbook and began counting out shillings and sixpenny pieces onto the counter. To save his "honour" he had been forced into a purchase which he could not possibly afford and which probably meant many bitter privations in other things. How I longed for the power to unsay my hasty, tactless words. But it was too late, and I felt that the kindest thing I could do now would be to walk away.

"You pay at the desk," the shop girl was telling him, but he did not seem to understand and kept trying to put the coins into her hand; and that was the last I saw or heard of the old man. Now he can never come there to sample plum puddings again.

REUNION

by

Sibby Peyser

All day Mrs. Mendel's hands had been trembling. This always happened when she was excited. Her face maintained its quiet expression, but she could not control her fingers. She spilled and dropped everything that she touched. She was exasperated with herself. "Just today when everything should be fine, the supper will be spoiled, —the fish will be too peppery—the chicken too salty," she scolded herself. In the morning she had thought it was fine that the boat was coming in Friday afternoon and that his first meal in this country would be the Sabbath supper. Now it seemed bad because on Friday there was so much more work, and with her excitement, she would never be finished in time. She kept looking at the clock. Two o'clock. Time to put on the soup. Now the boat must be within sight of the dock. Jakie and Annie would be there waiting. She had wanted to go, too. But it could not be arranged. They went directly from the cigar factory where they worked, and could not take the time to stop for her, and she did not yet know her way around the city alone. Better so, she thought now. The time was important.

She wondered how much he had changed. The four years seemed a long time. Her heart ached a little that he had given up his studies to come here, though she throbbed with joy to think of having him with her again. He looked more like his father than the other children, and had always been closer to her. It was better so, she assured herself, that they would all be together again. There would be a place for him somewhere in this big country.

Soon all the pots on the stove were singing. A huge golden brown twist stood in its tin on the table, cooling. A highly polished brass candelabra with seven tall candles stood ready on a tray for sundown. Mrs. Men-

del brushed her "shaytel" which Annie kept telling her it was time to abandon, and put on her new white apron. She went to the window to wait. The noise on the street three floors below sounded good to her ears. She felt a part of it. She leaned out and waved to the women on the stoop. They nodded knowingly to her—that she was waiting for her learned son, who was landing today. "Some housekeepers," she thought. "On a Friday they still find time to clotter up the steps and gossip the whole day."

The twins would soon come from school. They too were excited. They had begged to be allowed to stay at home for the day. She had almost given in, but knew they would only be in her way, with all her work to do, and sent them off complaining.

She took out and reread for probably the hundredth time the letter, which had started all the excitement—the running for tickets, and more letters, the purchase of another cot, which folded up and lost its identity with two others under some bright cretonne. Her eyes skipped some of the lines. She was proud of its perfect Yiddish.

"So lonely I am, mother dear, I cannot tell you. Grandpa has aged in these four years so much you would not know him. He spends all his time with Tante Rivka. The house is so desolate when I come from school, I cannot study. I fear too that I have lost my ambition. Each day I see more clearly the hypocrisy of the world, that true faith exists not at all... There is less and less tolerance here for the Jews. Because I go to Plutz every day to learn to be a rabbi, the little bandits run after me and call in Polish "Jew dog" and "limping Rabbi" and run in front of me imitating my lame walk... I am selfish to write you my troubles. I cannot go on here. Until now I have withheld the truth... The twins, do they still give you trouble? And Annie's betrothed, does he meet with your approval? I have written to the family of a fellow student in Mesrich, and they tell me this Max Prodya comes of a good family. I pray God that she will be happy... I cannot imagine how all of you look. I can think of you in no other way than when you boarded the train at Plutz with all the bundles, and all of you, with faces pressed against the windows, waved to us on the station, until suddenly I realized that the train had left and you were all gone—

and I was really alone. I felt the same then as when I came from school six years ago now, and with an intuitive heaviness of heart met you in the doorway, with a look on your face that I will never forget. "Mutka —your father is dead," you said simply, and took me in your arms... It cannot be right that we who were so close are now so distant..."

Again Mrs. Mendel dried her eyes. Each time the letter moved her as deeply as the first. "Limping Jew!" It tore at her breath that he should have been tortured so. It gave her mouth a bitter taste. Always she had tried to make it up to him that he limped. Always she had taught the others to be sensitive for their brother. How could she have known that what she sought to avoid for him happened anyway, that all the precaution succeeded in producing in him a super-sensitiveness, an acuter awareness of his deformity? He was right—it was wrong for him to be without the comfort of his family. It was wrong that she should not be there to suffer his hurt with him. But she would make it up. The others too. She had to reassure herself on this: each had so definitely developed a life of his own apart from the family in these four years. They were becoming more and more Americanized. Annie and Jacob spoke English all the time. Each day the heaviness with which they spoke the new language grew lighter, and the words seemed more and more to place themselves where they should really go. They attended night school, which was fun and relaxation for them. There Annie had met Max Prodya, a fellow countryman, a carpenter, who called steadily now at the Mendel home. Jacob belonged to seven organizations, actively. He could not seem to do enough. The twins, Molly and David, eleven, took their school work seriously, had already caught up to the others of their age, and lost their accents entirely. David played baseball and football and Molly read "Little Women" and "Jo's Boys." And so, through the children, Mrs. Mendel was taking on the new customs and talking the new language in her own broken way.

She saw the twins come racing down the street. They tore into the room panting.

"Not yet, Mom?"

"When will he come?"

She made them wash their hands and faces. Molly had to put on a clean dress, comb her hair and wear a blue hair-ribbon. Then she began to set the table. David had to put on a clean shirt and wear a tie, and then because his mother told him to stay indoors in order not to get dirty, he began to tease his sister. He reset everything she placed on the table until she had to run after him with a fork and Mrs. Mendel had to scream at them both in terror that they would really hurt each other.

The noise subsided instantly at the ring of the downstairs doorbell.

"Mutka—he's coming!" Mrs. Mendel stood quietly.

Molly in panic ran to the table and threw the fork down, and attempted to straighten her hair and dress—just as if strangers were coming.

David ran to the door.

It all turned out so differently from what each in his own way had imagined. Mutka, who on the boat thought continuously of the way they would all fly into his arms and his arms would not be big enough to reach around them all, stood now on the threshold almost with fear. This was because the beginning had been so bad. At the pier the kisses had been brief. He had ventured what was intended to be, "I am glad to see you," in a nasal English in which he had been coached on the steamer by a boy who had the sleeping-berth above his own,—which had set Annie and Jacob laughing hysterically. Then all at once he had hurled question after question at them in Yiddish—mingled with some expressive Polish—which sounded to them unnecessarily loud and caused them to glance apprehensively over their shoulders. He sensed immediately that they were ashamed of him, and shut his lips tight. He felt all eyes upon him and blushed furiously all the way, aware of the obvious story his big black student's hat and loose-fitting suit told. It was horrible—that ride. The swiftly moving train, the crowds, the odor of so many human bodies suffocated him. He was nauseated and his head was reeling with

impressions of new faces and smells. Gone was the soaring he had experienced as the steamer sailed into the harbor and the New York sky-line, like adream city, met his view—gone the welling with hope as the outlines sharpened and took on reality.

"Mama"—Annie had said reproachfully—"Mutka is here."

Then Mrs. Mendel had slowly walked to him and taken him in her arms. They both cried and the others watched in embarrassment. It was all very quiet and sad, not noisily happy as they had planned.

When Mutka addressed them by the names he had always used, "Hanna—Yankel—Mollka—Duvid"—they squirmed and looked uncomfortable. Already they talked of what his new name should be, and since they had now been in the country four years, "Mortimer," they decided and began immediately to call him that. He could not even say it.

He sat at the window quietly, looking, looking, looking—for a while at them—at the apartment—then outside—at the streets, the people—the stores. The others unpacked his clothes, giggling, and recalled incidents that seemed to be of another life. Mutka watched them. He did not help.

Mrs. Mendel walked from room to room. In the kitchen she stirred and tasted. In the parlor, which was also a bedroom, she helped with the unpacking and now and then addressed Mutka. All the while her eyes were on him. She felt as if she would burst for him. She felt his aloneness. She wanted to bring them all together in joy—but did not know what to say.

"Mother," Mutka said, "Is it not time to light the candles?"

"Ai," she said, "in the excitement I have forgotten."

She stood before the candles, praying, lighting them, and covered her eyes with her hands. They all stopped to watch her. It was as if Mutka's eyes compelled them.

The candle-light mellowed the atmosphere of the room. The mother turned to them. "Good Shabbos, *Kinder,*" she said slowly. Then she walked to Mutka. "*Gut Shabbos*—Mutka"—she began again to cry on his shoulder, and the tears streamed down his face.

"Enough water works." Jakie said. "Happy—we oughter be. Let's eat. I'm hungry."

"*Kiddish?*" Mutka asked as he saw them move to the table.

"Yes, my son, you will say it." The mother led him to the kitchen sink, where he solemnly washed his hands, and then to his place at the table.

She placed the twist before him, covered it with a napkin, moving quietly. Then the boy's voice rang out clear and sad and beautiful. It was not quite dark and the candle-light fell across his face. His hands gripped the table's edge, as he swayed slightly with his prayer. They were all touched. He seemed to be calling them back with him to the Sabbath meals four years ago. He sat down heavily.

"Gee, Mom," Jakie pulled out his watch, "gotta go soon."

"Tonight, too, Jakie?" Mrs. Mendel asked quietly.

Jakie's eyelids dropped. "He must be tired anyway. It's a Friends of Harlem dance—I gotta go."

"Yes," the mother said quietly and handed him his plate of soup.

"Momma—you wanta be alone with him—don't you? I'm going out with Max." Annie said hesitantly.

"He comes here first, to get you, doesn't he?" Mrs. Mendel looked at her.

"No, Momma, tonight I'm meeting him. Maybe it would be better to wait until we get him a new suit and a haircut before we show him to Max." She glanced nervously at her brother to see whether her words had any meaning for him.

Mrs. Mendel sucked in her cheeks. The twins, too, they would go to the movies as on other Friday nights. She would not try to stop them. She felt helpless.

During the bustle of clearing the table and doing the dishes, they all warmed a little. They began to ask Mutka about this one and that one and he told them all the gossip. Of himself, nothing. But the liveliness of the family brought a warm flush to his cheeks...

After a while Jakie got his hat and slapped Mutka's back trying to be friendly. "See you later," he said and ran down the steps. They could hear him whistling "I Can't Give You Anything But Love."

Annie began to powder her face and looked a long while at herself in the mirror while she put on her hat. She kissed Mutka good-bye and said to him in Yiddish, "On Sunday—Max will come to meet you—Mutka."

"I will be happy to know the betrothed of my little sister," he said to her.

Molly and David kissed him too and left with Annie who promised to walk with them to the picture-house.

"*Kinder*—" Mrs. Mendel called after them. "You mustn't see it twice tonight. Come home early."

After they had gone, mother and son sat on the edge of the bed and spoke softly, stroking each other's hands.

Mutka's eyes looked at her questioningly. "So changed they are—Mother. But you are the same. I no longer seem to know them."

"It's the new country, my son," the mother said slowly, stroking his hand, her eyes piercing his with a longing to see what the years would do to him.

HAPPY JACK

by

William March

The Merchants Printing Company faced Court House Square, and when work was slack, Jack Sutton, the proprietor, would sit back in a chair, his feet upon his littered desk, and smile at the people who passed his window. He was a small man with nervous hands, a jutting, deeply curved nose, and a round chin, delicately modeled, which did not seem to fit the rest of his face. After awhile, his friends would drop in, one by one, to talk. Jack was fond of people and he set great store by his friends. Secretly, he was pleased at his popularity in the town. Not even his radical views affected his standing: everybody liked him, and joked with him, in spite of the fact that they thought him somewhat impractical, if not actually eccentric.

For example, a group would be discussing an actress or a society woman mentioned in the papers as having smoked a cigarette in a public place, and Jack would become excited and lean forward eagerly. "What's wrong with that, if she *wanted* to do it? I can't for the life of me see how smoking cigarettes has anything to do with her morals."

Mr. Palmiller spoke then, in his quick, waspish voice. "Would you want *your* wife, or daughter, to smoke a cigarette?" "Why, sure," said Jack; "that is if I had a wife or daughter."

"I'd hate to think what would become of the world, if everybody felt like you do," said Ira Cunningham, shaking his head.

Then Jack would begin to laugh, the lines in his cheeks deepening. "Now, Ira, I'm not as bad as all that!" he would protest good-naturedly. After a moment, he would say more seriously: "Of course I can see your viewpoint, too, but I think you're wrong; you're looking at this thing the wrong way."

Then Willis Overton would speak up. "Jack doesn't really mean

what he says; he's just talking to be different."

"But I do mean it!" said Jack earnestly. "I do mean it, Willis!"

Then everybody would laugh, and shake their heads. "Folks may think that way where you came from," said Ira Cunningham heavily, "but people here wouldn't stand for such things. No sir, they wouldn't stand for such goings-on a minute!"

Later, when Jack had gone to Mrs. Furness' boarding house, where he lived, he would think of these conversations. Then he would smile tolerantly. "These people are all right," he would think. "They pretend to be hard, and all that, but down underneath they are kind and charitable. I'm not fooled by what they say."

And so several years passed. The printing shop was prospering, and Jack felt that he was now a definite part of the town. Then one night a shocking thing happened.

Three miles from town, on the Valley City Road, a widow named Pierce ran a small farm. Her husband had been dead for some years, and, since that time, she had living on the place a negro man, called "Driver," who took care of the heavy farm work. The farm was isolated, and nobody paid much attention to the widow Pierce and her farm-hand until Mrs. Joe Cotton, in the course of her home missionary work discovered that Driver and Mrs. Pierce were living together as man and wife.

There was considerable excitement when Mrs. Cotton made her report public, and the next night a committee of masked men called at the Pierce farm. There were eight men in the party, but they selected Ira Cunningham their spokesman, and the other men hid behind trees and bushes.

Ira walked up the steps and knocked on the door. Mrs. Pierce opened it a little. "I want to see your nigger, Driver," he said.

"What do you want to see him about?"

"I want to see him about training me a bird-dog for next fall."

"He ain't in here," said Mrs. Pierce.

"He's here, all right," said Ira. Then he turned and spoke to the men concealed outside. "Come on in; he's here all right."

The eight men pushed into the room and Driver stood there leaning

against the back door, too frightened to run. His clean overalls were patched at both knees with squares of a darker material. The patches were crudely sewn, with no two of the stitches the same length, as if done by someone whose sight was failing. His shoulders were jerking and his jaw trembled. Sam Whittemore walked over and hit him in the face. Driver's head banged against the wall, but he made no effort to protect himself.

Mrs. Pierce began to throw herself about, but Bob Jowder and a man named Ellis shoved her into a closet and turned the key. She thrashed about on the floor and beat the partition with her fists. "I know the names of every one of you!" she screamed. "If you hurt Driver, I'll have you all arrested! I will!—I'll have you all arrested, so help me God!" But the men paid no attention to her. They closed in on Driver, dragging him down the steps in the direction of the barn; and there, by the light of a lantern, a sack stuffed in his mouth to muffle his cries, the man named Ellis castrated him with a bone-handled pocket knife.

Before the eight men returned, late that night, the town, somehow knew what had happened, and were talking about it in excited groups. But Jack Sutton did not hear of it until breakfast the next morning. One of his fellow boarders, Creary Berdine, had the exact details. Finally Mrs. Furness spoke up: "It's too bad that the law couldn't have taken its course, but Driver got just what was coming to him, I suppose." Then she spoke loudly so that the colored cook could hear her: "I hope this will be a lesson to the other negroes in this town."

Jack sat there with a puzzled look on his face. "But why?" he asked. "Whose business was it? What difference did it make?"

Old Mrs. D'Alembert got up and threw down her napkin. "I won't stay to hear American womanhood insulted," she said; "I won't listen to it!" She looked at Jack furiously, tears of rage in her eyes.

"But I don't see?" said Jack—"I'm not insulting anybody." But Mrs. D'Alembert withdrew from the room, banging the door behind her.

Then everybody laughed, but Mrs. Furness spoke to Jack, gravely. "We know you're only talking in fun, but you shouldn't tease poor old Mrs. D'Alembert that way, Mr. Sutton... You owe her an apology.

You really do!"

Jack shook his head helplessly but he did not say anything: all that morning the matter remained in his mind, troubling him. At noon he went over to the Farmers National Bank, to talk to Willis Overton, whom he considered his closest friend. "I'll admit it sounds pretty bad to an outsider," said Willis, "but what else could people do, in a case of this sort? You can't let a white woman live with a nigger that way!" "Why not, if it's what they both want?" asked Jack. "Well," said Willis, "it sets a bad example, I suppose," Jack's face became red with anger. He got up suddenly and overturned a chair. Then he sat down again, and looked at the floor.

Willis Overton was folding paper into squares, a distressed expression on his face. "You don't belong to the town, Jack, and you can't understand our viewpoint," he said. Then, as Jack Sutton rose to go, he came over to him and caught him by the arm. "Listen, Jack," he said; "you can say anything to me that you want to, but don't talk the way you have before other people. You can't do any good, and you'll only get yourself in trouble."

But Jack paid little attention to his friend's advice. All that day, and for days following he talked of nothing except the affair at the Pierce farm. The more he talked about it, the more it seemed to oppress him. He stopped strangers on the street, going over his arguments again and again. Finally he wrote an article reviewing the affair, in which he defended the right of Mrs. Pierce and Driver to live together as man and wife, if they, as individuals, chose to do so. They hurt nobody, he declared, and nobody had a right to interfere, or sit in judgment.

"The fact that Driver was a negro, and Mrs. Pierce a white woman, has nothing to do with the situation," he wrote. "I am not going into that phase of the matter at all: I would feel as strongly about it, if they were both white, or if they were both black: that is not my point. But I do claim that they, as individuals, have a right to lead any moral life that suits them. If you people do not approve of the life they lead, then you as individuals, have an equal right to have nothing to do with them. That is sound and simple. That, at least, is understandable. But for a mob to

go out there, and mutilate a human being. who could not even defend himself, is unbelievable among people who call themselves civilized."

Sutton took considerable pains with his article, and when it was finished, he read it with a feeling of triumph. "When people read my arguments, they'll see the matter in a different light," he thought. "They'll be ashamed of themselves, then. You may be sure of that." Later Jack printed the article on his press and sent a copy of it to every resident in the county.

At the end of the week a farmer named Jim Prouty came to see Jack. Jim was about fifty years old. He wore high starched collars without a necktie, and when he was a boy his left eye had been blinded by a blow from a stone. Jim sat down and took from his pocket a copy of Jack's pamphlet, tapping it, for emphasis, against his knee. He came to the point at once: "I wanted to come by and shake hands with you, Mr. Sutton," he said, "because I believe you're a straight thinker, and I wanted to tell you I believe what you say is right."

Jack leaned forward impulsively, in his old manner. His eyes were interested and eager again. To himself he kept saying: "I knew it! I knew people would see this thing, once they had it put before them in the right way!"

"Yes, sir," continued Jim, "you've got the right slant. I've knowed Driver for more than twenty-five years, and there wasn't a better nigger in Pearl County. He wasn't to blame: I guess any nigger would have done the same thing, if a white woman give him the chance."

Jim blinked his blind eye, over which a dirty, phlegm-like film had formed. "Yes, sir, any nigger would have acted the same way, I guess, and, like you said, that mob shouldn't have harmed him none." For a moment Jim sat silent. Then he nodded his head a couple of times. "What the boys *should* have done," he added; "what they *should* of done, when they went to the farm that night, was to take a big needle and a piece of copper wire and sew up that sorry Pierce woman. That's what they *should* of done, I guess!" Then, before Jack could say anything in reply, Jim walked out of the office, mounted his saddle mule and rode off down the road, the sun beating on his white collar, the hooves of his

mule kicking sand into the air.

When he had gone, Jack Sutton sat motionless, then, on a sudden impulse, he went to his door and bolted it, as if the town frightened him, and he wanted to shut it out. After that he lowered the shades in his office and sat in semi-darkness for a long time.

Later he got up and walked away from the town. When he had gone about three miles, he turned off from the road, through an abandoned field, and went toward the creek that fed James Lake. It was late in June and the air was very still; the sunlight beat down on the old field, leaving a shimmer above it. Beside him the creek moved quietly, and in the bay trees that grew thickly, birds chirped. Jack lay on his side and held his hand in the water, feeling its coolness. His head felt hot and tight and he trembled at quick intervals. Then, for some reason, he remembered why he had come to Reedyville to live, why he had picked it above all places. Suddenly he felt foolish, and he began to laugh at himself mockingly. He was glad now that he had never told the story to anybody, not even to Willis Overton.

But when he had been a young man, during the Spanish American war, he had found himself, along with many other soldiers, on a troop train bound for New Orleans. On the third day of the trip he had awakened to realize that the train was no longer in motion. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. All about him were men sleeping heavily, their arms and legs thrown wide, and there was, in the coach, an odor of cigarette smoke, breath and perspiration so sharp that he could almost taste the stale odor on his tongue.

In disgust, he put on his clothes, walked to the end of the train, and looked about him. To the left of the siding was a cottage flanked by crepe-myrtles cut back to make a hedge, now in full bloom, with blossoms scattered on the grass. In the night, spiders had spun webs over the hedge, which had caught, and held dew, and as Jack watched, the sun came up between two trees, slanting the cabin with its light and turning the drenched webs into fire. Then a cow bell sounded from a field a long way off and a bird repeated, three times, a single note that was incredibly liquid and moving.

At that instant the place had taken on a meaning beyond the scattered blossoms, the blazing cobwebs or the slow note of the bird. An eager look came into his eyes. "Everything is so quiet," he had whispered; "everything is so quiet, newly washed and beautiful..." Then he had stretched his arms wide and held them out to something which he did not understand and had thought: "Some day I'm coming back to this place. This is where I want to spend my life."

As Jack remembered his gesture, he began to curse and to laugh harshly. Before him, at the edge of the old field, two mice came and looked at him, twitching their whiskers. Then he stood upright, but the sense of terror which had made him walk into the country came over him again more sharply. His knees felt weak, suddenly, and he lay down again by the stream, breaking up twigs and throwing them into the current.

But when the sun was low in the sky, he got up, feeling stronger, and more calm, and bathed his face in the stream. Then he brushed off his clothes, turned and walked toward Mrs. Furness' boarding house. It was late when he reached it, and supper was almost over, but he seated himself, with the other boarders, and began to eat. Then immediately he put down his fork and laughed loudly, his eyes crinkled into a tight line.

"Well," said Mrs. Furness, "tell us the joke, so we can laugh too." But Jack did not answer. His nose was drawn down, and white, and his round chin began to tremble. "Tell us the joke," Mrs. Furness urged. "Tell us the joke, Mr. Sutton." Jack did not hear them. His voice had become hysterical and shrill, and tears ran down his cheeks.

Mrs. Furness became alarmed. "Mr. Sutton!" she said sharply; and then, again: "Mr. Sutton!" Creary Berdine and Harry D'Alembert came over and shook Jack's shoulders. At their touch, he slid from his seat and fell to the floor, and lay with his face pressed into Mrs. Furness' red and green rug.

An hour later they had undressed him and put him to bed. They tied his arms and legs with clothes-line and bound him to the bed with trunk straps. All that night and all the following day Jack continued to laugh... "I see what you mean!" he shouted, over and over, "but I'm the

only one who really understands what you're driving at!... You've got the right slant on things, and I'm glad to make your acquaintance!" Then he would fling himself upward, trying to free his hands and legs, the iron bed making a thumping noise against the floor. At length he would lie back, and begin laughing again... "A needle and a piece of copper wire was all you needed!" he would say. Then he would start laughing again.

A crowd of people gathered in front of Mrs. Furness' gate, and she went out, and asked them to move on. "It's Mr. Jack Sutton," she explained. "We don't know what it is, yet, but it's some sort of fever... You'd better not stop. It may be catching."

Bob Kirkland listened to the unending laughter for a moment and spoke up: "I don't care if I do catch it, if it makes me feel as happy as Jack!" he said. Later on his answer was repeated many times, and the nickname caught on at once. The whole town discussed Happy Jack Sutton and his strange sickness. Then, three days later, he stopped laughing as suddenly as he had begun. But he seemed to have shriveled during his sickness. His face was pasty, his lips were drawn back from his teeth and the lines in his cheeks had deepened. On the afternoon he returned to his shop, a committee of his old friends dropped in to congratulate him on his recovery, but Jack would not see them. He stood locked in his office and spoke through the door. "Get out of here!" he said; "get out and don't ever come back—any of you!" Then his lips drew tight, and he bared his teeth. His head shook back and forth in a caricature of mirth, but no sound came.

That week he moved from Mrs. Furness' boarding house, and slept on a cot in the back of the shop, eating his meals at the Deerhorn Cafe when it occurred to him that he was hungry. He began to avoid everyone he had known, and he would even stare at people with such a look of cold contempt, that they were uneasy. Soon the people of the town began, in turn, to avoid him, and they would draw away, apprehensively, at his approach. His business fell away rapidly, and soon there was no work for him at all. Six months after his sickness his equipment was seized under an attachment and sold at sheriff's sale. Jack stood

there indifferently. He was penniless. He had no place to turn; and no way to earn a living for himself.

An old friend of his, Adolph Moore, came over to him. "Where are you going to live, Jack?" he asked. Jack did not answer. He shrugged his shoulders and turned away. Something about his frail, drooping figure touched Adolph. "I tell you what, Jack." he said; "I got a room fixed up over my livery stable. It ain't much to look at, but you can stay there, if you want to. I can pay you a little," continued Adolph, "for helping with the horses and watching the place at night. It won't be much, but it'll be better than nothing, I guess, until you get on your feet again." Jack did not look up. He stood thinking. Then he nodded his head, turned, and followed Adolph Moore.

The room was dark, and during rainy weather it leaked. At one end was a small iron stove, its legs resting on four cans of packed sand. Above the stove was a pine shelf containing a can of condensed milk, a sugar bowl, with a tin spoon protruding, and a bottle of catsup which had begun to ferment.

And so a new life began for Jack. He would work for hours, drawing a curry-comb across the flanks of the horses until they were like satin; watching the wrinkles of delight that ran behind his stroke. In time each horse came to have for him a distinct individuality, and when nobody was around, he would sit on a box, facing the stalls, and talk to them. Often he would tell them about the time he stood at the end of the troop-train and watched the sunrise and the blazing cobwebs. "As the train moved away," he would say, "an old man with a hoe on his shoulder was crossing the tracks, making a swishing noise as he brushed through the grass. I stood there waving my arms and shouting at him; but the old man was deaf, and at first he did not understand what I wanted to know. Then the train began to move faster, but the old man ran after it, his hoe jerking up and down, his hand cupped to his ear... 'Hey? Hey?' he kept saying in a cracked voice. "At last he understood what I wanted to know... 'Reedyville!' he shouted. 'This town in *Reedyville!*' Then he sat down on the track and wiped his face and neck with a handkerchief."

Jack would laugh his soundless laugh, his eyes shut, his face twisted. He would rock back and forth on the box while his whole body trembled to his silent mirth. When he had finished, he would begin to cry angrily. "One of these days I'm going to tell this town what I think of it!" he would say. "You just wait. I'll tell them yet. You'll see!" But the horses would make a whinnying sound and look at him with their soft eyes, nuzzling his cheeks with their lips.

Occasionally, when the regular drivers were busy, Jack would be called to take a traveling salesman to Morgan City or Hodgetown, but this happened rarely. His sullen manner and scowling face alarmed such strangers, and they generally preferred waiting until one of the regular drivers returned. Then, too, he had grown incredibly tattered with the years. His finger nails and ears were caked with dirt and there was about him a strong odor of the stables. He was never asked to drive any of the local people: they would not have risked their lives with him. They considered him a madman and were of the opinion that he should be locked up.

"I saw that Happy Jack on Oak Street today," Mrs. George Wheeler would say to her Wednesday afternoon Book Club. "I had to hold my nose, he smelled so bad!—He was walking along with his lips moving, but when he saw me, he stopped and looked at me in a way that made my blood run cold! Then he stopped, and began to laugh without making any sound. His face was twisted up until he looked like a monkey."

"Something ought to be done about him," said Emmaline Hemmes; "I don't know what this town is coming to. He ought to be put in an institution!" Then the ladies would put down their cards and discuss Happy Jack for a long time.

But Jack cared little what people thought of him. As the years passed, he went into town less and less, and finally he did not leave the stable at all, except when he had to buy food for himself. He would come into McArthur's grocery regularly at five o'clock of an afternoon, holding in his hand a slip on which was written his list of groceries, and wait silently until Mr. McArthur, or his clerk, Chester Penny, took the order. He always spent his money in unusual amounts, such as eleven

cents worth of flour, eight cents worth of molasses or six cents worth of kerosene. If there were other customers present when he entered the store, they would move away, and glance at him out of the corners of their eyes.

Then, later, as he walked down the street, his purchases clasped to his breast, people would step to one side of the narrow, wooden sidewalk, giving him the right of way. Often he was pointed out to strangers: "That's Happy Jack Sutton," they would say. "He had a fever fifteen years ago, and he hasn't been right since."

And so the years passed. There was Jack Sutton, an old man with a stooped back, spindling legs and gray hair that hung soiled and matted to his shoulders. It would have been hard to recognize in this feeble creature the young soldier who stood at the end of a train, more than thirty years before, with eager eyes and uplifted arms. A new generation had grown up in the town since that time. They knew nothing of his early life. They remembered him only as a village character, a furious old man with blear-eyes and teeth rotted and broken with decay. Indeed, Jack's teeth troubled him for a long time. Often at night they ached so badly that he could not sleep. At such times he lay in bed making a sound that resembled the whinnying of the horses in their stalls below. At last an old negro man named Zilk, who hung around the stables, offered to pull Jack's teeth, and one night, when he was in special pain, he consented. Afterwards he lay on his bed, a soiled rag pressed against his gums. Then, on the second afternoon, he went to McArthur's Grocery, to buy corn-meal and milk to make gruel.

It had rained steadily that day and a misty rain was still falling as Jack walked down Lipscomb Street, stepping over puddles of water that stood undrained in the street, the few coins he possessed clutched in his palm. Then he turned into Oak Street and approached the store. When he entered, the other customers drew back in fear. But almost immediately a gasp of surprise went up, and everybody began to nudge his neighbor and whisper behind his hand. They looked at each other in a puzzled manner, uncertain if this man were really Happy Jack. For the loss of his teeth had made a startling change in Sutton's appearance. His

nose was pinched at its roots, and bent downward, and his face foreshortened and folded back, and as he stood there, grasping the counter for support, his body weak and breathless, even the dullest person could see that Happy Jack was not a dark figure to be feared; he was only an old man with vacant gums, and a deflated face, who could harm no one.

Chester Penny, Mr. McArthur's red-headed clerk, wrapped up Jack's parcels, and placed them before him. Then, from a bin behind the counter, he scooped a handful of Brazil nuts and placed them in Jack's open palm, along with his change. He winked knowingly at his other customers. "Hey, Happy Jack!" he said; "crack these nuts, and you can have 'em!" Chet held his sides and laughed explosively at his joke, and everybody laughed with him. Jack stood looking from face to face, surprised, unprepared for this new attitude. Then, quickly, he flung the nuts at the clerk's head. But everybody laughed more than ever at that. They doubled up with laughter, shaking their fingers at him and clucking their lips as if they were talking to a child: "Tsch! Tsch!—that's no way to act, Happy!" they said. "That's no way to act!"

Jack picked up his purchases and walked from the store. A crowd of half-grown boys and men had formed outside... "Hey!—what's your rush Happy!" they said. "Where you think you're going, anyway?" Then the crowd blocked his path, surrounding him, and began pushing him about and pulling his beard and his long, matted hair. One of the boys kicked his heels in the air and began to bleat like a goat. "H-a-a-ppy J-a-a-ck!" he said..."H-a-a-ppy J-a-a-ck!"...

"Look out!" said Chet Penny from the doorway; "look out he don't *bite* you!"

Jack stood with his back to the store, examining each face as if he wanted to fix it in his mind forever. The crowd became larger and the sidewalk was blocked. People from adjoining stores peered from their windows, or stood in the street, to watch the fun, as Jack, his body shaking, his jaws working, backed slowly away. But when he reached the edge of the wooden walk, somebody stuck out a foot, and somebody gave him a push, and Jack tripped and fell into a puddle of water. He lay on his back in the mud, his purchases scattered about him, the meal sack

broken and spilling slowly, the milk mixing with the mud and giving it a rich coloring.

Then he stood on his unsteady legs and faced his tormentors. His wet clothing adhered to his body, outlining its frailty, and particles of mud smeared his face and clung to his beard.

"And so I says, 'crack these nuts,'" repeated Chet Penny from the doorway, laughing again at his joke. "I says, 'crack these nuts and you can have' em!' "

Willis Overton, an old man with a neat white beard, was pushing his way through the crowd. "Don't!" he said in a kindly, protesting voice. "Don't tease him! —Don't tease the crazy old man!"...

Jack turned then and stared incuriously at Willis, as if he had never seen him before, at the yapping, excited faces that surrounded him, at the town itself. Suddenly his lips began to move. "I'm not crazy, Willis," he said; "but I wish to God I was crazy!" Then he stood erect, squared his bent shoulders... "Now is the time," he thought; "now is the time to tell these people what I think of them!" He opened his jaws and began to talk rapidly, but with his teeth gone, and his cheeks sucked in, his voice came out of his throat cracked and reedy, like a cheap whistle, hissing against his gums with a lisping sound, and the things he was saying, which he had thought profound as he lay in the dark room over the stable, seemed absurd now, even to himself.

He quit talking as suddenly as he had begun and stood there in silence, his chin working patiently to touch the tip of his nose, his arms hanging from his shoulders without tone. Then he raised his arms and kept pushing at the air. "God damn this town!" he whispered. "God damn this town and everybody in it!" Then his face twisted quickly; his lips trembled, sucked in and puckered out slowly, as if he awaited a kiss.

The boy who could bleat like a goat began again to kick his heels in the air. Then everybody began to laugh and bleat like a goat, their voices rolling in confused volume over the roof tops, toward the sky.. "H-a-a-ppy Jack!" they shouted, "Ha-a-a-ppy J-a-a-ck!"

LIMERICK KITCHEN

by

Charles Kendall O'Neill

UNCLE Willie was going fine. The five of us were sitting around in the kitchen at 9 Sexton St. and Cathleen, the cousin, represented logic.

"You can't whack the Balkan states," said Willie.

This was a change from Irish life. Willie's usual claim was that that couldn't be beaten.

"But we weren't talking about the Balkan states," said Cathleen.

Willie bowed and gestured with his arms as though inviting her for lancers. He straightened up and put his glass of stout down on the table.

"Bulgaria is bigger but Montenegro is higher," he said.

Cathleen pushed her glass of milk over to him.

"You're after talking about medicine," she said. "There will you take it?"

Willie stopped capering and looked at the black glass and the white glass solemnly. He rubbed his cornsilky mustache back on both sides with the back of his hand. He picked up the glass of milk, turned it around in his hand and examined it against the light. He set it down and pointed to it.

"That's not medicine."

"If you regard food as—"

Willie repeated his statement.

"That's not medicine."

He picked up the glass of stout with a flourish and examined it. He sat down again carefully and pointed to it.

"And that's not medicine."

"No," said Cathleen, "it isn't."

"Ah," said Uncle Willie.

He took the milk in his left hand and the stout in his right and lifted them with another flourish. They clinked together as he joined them in the air.

"But black and white," he said, "black and white is medicine."

He set them down and put his finger alongside his nose.

"Together," he said. "Together they are medicine."

Cathleen had seven brothers and five sisters. She fancied herself in an argument.

"Uncle Willie," she asked, "will you get me a glass of water, please?"

Willie held the sides of his trousers and curtsied. He danced out of the kitchen.

Cathleen stabbed up through the air with her index finger.

"I'll make him drink the water," she said.

Aunt Mary shook her head. Uncle Mike gave me a cigarette and took one himself.

"A terrible man," said Mike. "A terrible man entirely."

Mike was confused by the clock. It was the big grandfather one in the front room and Willie wouldn't fix it and Aunt Mary said what fine brothers she had and Mike had worked on it for a week and it became even more confusing. There was almost a minute between the strokes now.

"Cathy may get him," he said.

Willie came back with the water. He set it down in front of Cathleen and stood back from the table.

"What do you need most in a desert?" he asked.

He turned around to us for support. Aunt Mary got going on the dishes. Cathleen pushed the glass of water across the table to him.

"If it will do me good, it will do you good," she said. "Drink it."

Willie lifted his feet up like a cat with its feet wet and moved closer to the table.

"You can do without food," he said. "But what do you want if you're days and days in the desert?"

"Will you drink it?" said Cathleen.

"Take a plant," said Willie. "Could a plant grow on this table?"

He rapped the table.

"I dare you to drink it," said Cathleen.

Willie stepped away from the table and circled back to it on the other side. He cocked his head sideways and looked at Cathleen.

"You dare me to drink it?"

"Yes, I dare you to drink it."

Mike pushed his elbow into my stomach.

"She may get him yet," he said in a whisper.

"Why do you dare me to drink it?" asked Willie.

"Because I do."

"Why do you do this?"

"I have my reasons."

"What are these reasons?"

"I dare you to drink that water."

Willie leaned back from his hips, looking at the glass of water with his hand up to his chin. He reached out and picked it up carefully. He held it to the light and then waved a finger of his other hand at Cathleen.

"Take a plant now," he said. "Could a plant grow on this table?"

Cathleen pointed to the glass of water in his hand. He set it down.

"Never could a plant grow on this table. There is no water."

Cathleen pointed to the water. Willie picked it up again.

"There is no water in the table. A plant could not grow there. Any kind of a plant. Flax seed, for instance, would not grow there. Water is what you're after needing. You need water for everything. What is tea without water?"

"Will you drink that?" asked Cathleen. It was wearing on her.

"It is like tobacco. Dry tea is like tobacco. But it isn't as good as tobacco. Turkish tobacco is best."

"Tobacco can be grown in Ireland," said Mike.

"What harm but we have to be going," said Cathleen. "Will you drink that?"

"Drink it in what manner?" asked Willie. He had been turning it around in his hand as he talked and now he was rocking the glass and watching the water roll around.

The doorknocker thumped. It was Uncle Ned and Aunt Nora coming for us. We came back into the kitchen after seeing them in. Cathleen was putting on her coat. I looked over at the glass. Half the water was gone.

"Did you drink it?" asked Cathleen.

Willie was demonstrating to Ned how to slip greyhounds. Mary was talking to Nora.

"Willie, did you drink it?"

Willie came over to us, still demonstrating with his clenched fist how you hold greyhounds on a straining leash.

"I don't let them go after a slow rabbit," he said.

Without answering the question, he drank the rest of the water and went over to show Mike about the greyhounds,

"Ah, he's innocent sure," said Aunt Nora.

TO MAINTAIN HIS POINT

by

Fred B. Maxham

She was eighteen and very beautiful with a full healthy beauty. She had just returned from her first year at college.

He was twenty-seven or thereabouts and thought himself unsentimental. He made it a point never to bind anyone in any way.

The previous summer they had told each other they loved. He had kept it a chaste love because she was young.

They sat by the lake shore, the first time they had been together for nine months, and if he would have permitted himself sentimentality, the man would have called the full moon romantic. They sat very close together, their bodies insatiable for contact after the long separation. They held each other tightly and kissed many times: and then they sat side by side—tight-pressed—with their arms loosely embracing, and facing the water, they talked.

The lake lay before them a long narrow slit in the wooded hills, gleaming from the moon nearby but merging into the deep blackness of the hills at the farther end.

It has been nine months, but now the three must compensate, the girl said.

We will make them compensate. We will swim and climb the mountain and on other days we will sit here while I read *Blind Raftery* to you. Or maybe you have changed and would not like *Raftery* now, the man said (for, though he did not know it, he did not dislike sentiment, only sentimentality).

Oh, no! I want to hear *Raftery* again. I will always enjoy hearing you read it to me. I have changed—yes—but not that way. I will tell you; but I want to hear *Raftery* again. Maybe tomorrow afternoon? the girl said.

They kissed, long, and then the man said: I will read it to you again tomorrow afternoon. But in what way have you changed? You are more beautiful, but in what other way, or is that all?

I will tell you—tonight, but not now. I must tell you tonight before it is too late—but not now, the girl said.

And later, she said: I have loved you all the time I have been gone, and I love you now, but let us say that I am over-healthy.

As if an afterthought she added: and you said you would not bind me. You said you bound no one.

They sat very quiet, both looking out over the lake. Each could feel the tremor of the other. And the girl continued: I had been drinking, though I will not say that it might not have happened anyway. There was just that once. I will put it in the worst light: I do not think it would have happened again, but anyway, it did not because there was to be a child. Of course, it could not be born, and that frightened me so that I could not help but be strong.

He had told her many times that he made it a point never to bind anyone in any way. His affection demanded no restrictions. So he had believed and had told her.

They had come to this place where they now were sitting many times the previous summer. They had come here in the afternoon while he read *Blind Raftery* or *Dissertation Upon Roast Pig*, and in the evening on moonlit nights to swim. He had loved her and had known that she loved him freely, but he had kept up a careful restraint sustained by the fullness of his affection.

They had spent the summer practically alone. His earlier friends had married and drifted from him, and he had been content till then in himself; while she had formed no companionships not easily broken by another interest. Their days and their evenings had been spent together that summer, and now they had planned another summer the same. They would swim and talk, and he would read to her.

They remained silent for a long time, and then she said: I must go home early tonight. It is my first day home and mother will wish to talk a while before going to bed.

Yes, he said.

The progress of the moon moved the tree-shadow that had covered them and left them clear in the light. Her full beautiful face was thick with unhappiness; his lips were thin as from concentration. They remained close-held by their arms.

If tomorrow you wish to read *Raftery* to me, you can call me at noon. I will not plan anything else, she said.

Then she stirred and he let his hand fall as if it had been held up mechanically.

I must go, she said.

Would you mind walking home alone? I feel like swimming. I want to swim up to the head of the lake and back, he said.

No, she said.

They stood up awkwardly and moved the kinks out of their muscles.

I will not plan anything else. If tomorrow you wish to read *Raftery* to me, you can call me at noon, she said and left.

Standing there after she had gone he dropped his clothes from his body till he stood naked and the moonlight made golden highlights and vague shadows on his body. He let his clothes fall in a crumpled heap and stood there a long time before diving into the lake.

The water was cold yet, and his muscles quivered from the shock of it. He swam vigorously till he was well free of the shore to warm himself. Then he swam along moderately through the deep waters of the lower end of the lake. Occasionally he dropped his feet down into the icy lower strata and drew them up again quickly. This made the surface water feel warmer. Once an owl hooted from the bank and he paused and tread water silently while he strained his eyes to see the owl. He knew that at that distance he could not see the owl in the blackness of the fir trees on the bank, but nevertheless he strained his eyes in hope of doing the impossible.

The head of the lake was shallow and grown up with water lilies. As he swam through them his arms and legs became entangled with the long lascivious stems and the pads scraped against his chest and loins. He had to swim carefully that he might not become dangerously entangled and

drown there alone. He searched through the numberless stems for the first bud, but it was yet too early for it to have reached the surface.

When his hand sunk in the soft formless silt of the lake-edge, he turned and started the hour's swim back to his clothes. Again he cautiously felt his way through the lily tangle into the open water. After twice through that danger he was weary and turned over on his back to rest by floating. The owl hooted again and the sound echoed heavily to his ears half-submerged in the water. He did not look for it this time. It was farther down the lake where he could hardly distinguish the forms of the outer row of trees.

Rested, he turned over face down and swam vigorously toward the lower end of the lake. His body felt a renewed strength and he swung his arms with an accurate stroke that carried him rapidly through the water. The owl hooted a third time, but he was too preoccupied timing the powerful strokes of his arms to be attracted by it. After the lily stems the open water was invigorating, and his second wind urged him to swim strongly.

The edge of the lake where they sat was sandy. When he reached the shallow water he dropped his feet to the sand where the water was waist deep and ran splashing to the shore.

He dried himself by rubbing the edges of his hands down his body with quick sharp strokes, and with his body still damp but fresh feeling, he hurriedly dressed and started toward home with long calm strides.

FAME TAKES THE J CAR

by

George Albee

Elco Hotel,
3rd & High St.,
Bridgeport, Ohio.

Mr. H. M. Rodney, Esq.,
Personnel Manager,
Riverside St. Ry. Co.,
Riverside, Ohio.

My dear Sir:

Well, Mr. Rodney, I guess you will be sort of surprised to hear from me. I am down here in Bridgeport, fifty miles away from home.

Well, Mr. Rodney, the reason I am writing is, I think the Company is not treating me fair. I think every man has right to tell their own side of the story, don't you? So I will begin at the beginning, and then maybe you will agree I have a right to say what I'm going to say.

At Polytechnic High, Bertha was the most popular girl, and she was in the Mimerian Society, which has a motto Leadership, Scholarship, and Character. Well, I hate to toot my own horn, but I was in the Mimerian Society, too. When we told Miss Farnum we was engaged, she said it was fine, because we would be civic leaders together all our lives just like we were at Poly High. Then it was just get out and hustle, for Bertha and me, from the word Go. But we knew all the biggest men in the country have started at the bottom of the ladder, and you can not keep a good man down, just like you say yourself, Mr. Rodney, in your wonderful articles in Trainmen's Topics every month. Bertha wanted to go to clerking at the Five and Dime store. This no-account brother of hers,

Herb, had just gotten married, too, and his wife was working to support him, and they had a lot of fancy furniture they bought over to the Mercantile. It was no good, because they got a kind with pink kewpies painted all over it, and then all the gilt come off right away, but at first I guess Bertha was pretty jealous. But I always say a woman's place is in the home.

Working my way through Poly, I had one job at Lacey's drug store, and Mr. Lacey said I was the best soda-jerk he ever had. Then I had a job delivering the Clarion-Gazette on my bicycle. They give me a bronze button to wear in my button-hole, because I never had any complaints on my route. Now I was through school. What was the sense of it all, I figured, if you did not get a job with a future to it? I knew I was sort of different from most fellows, with what everyone always said about me and all. We had a contest at Poly, and I was elected Man Most Likely To Succeed, and things like that all the time, I mean. So right at first I didn't know what job to get. But I was in the Hi-Y Club (that was a club of manly Christian fellows that was the leaders at school, I guess you remember) and one night at the Y. M. C. A. you made us a speech, Mr. Rodney! All about what you have done for Riverside, and about your ideals. And about how the Riverside Street Railway Company was only hiring men with high school educations. Gee, I guess you will think I am trying to soft soap you, but I remember every word you said. I mean, about its being a job for men of ideals, because the Company has such wonderful ideals of service and all. Mr. Rodney, that was the most inspiring moment of my life!

So the next morning bright and early I went down to see you. I went down town on the street-car, and on the way I hung around the back platform and sort of watching the con, you know, and thinking what fine work it was, and how interesting it must be to meet all those folks every day. I guess I am a philosopher, sort of. Most young married couples just go to the movies after supper, but Bert and I will walk up and down Main St. just studying people. I study books on success, too; but Bert does not do that. That is one fault I will have to admit she has. She thinks you get rich by getting lucky breaks. She gets ideas like that from

her brother Herb, that is always getting excited over some hairbrained scheme. If it was not for Herb, I would not be in this terrible trouble I am in now, with my heart broken. But what I started to say is, I went down town to our Company building. Gee, I was scared! You know how it is, asking for your first real job. I know you have gone through it, yourself; although some of the fellows say you got your job through pull, because when you got out of college your father owned a lot of stock in our Company. You would be surprised if you knew how much slandering talk like that goes around the car barns every day in the year. I could give you the name of man after man that is always running you and the other executives down, if I was the kind that carries tales. And those men are still working for you right today, and here I am fired! It just don't seem fair, Mr. Rodney. But I will tell you it all, and then you will see for yourself. I was telling you how I came down to the office, that first time, seven years ago. I tell you, it is a mighty big moment when a fellow chooses his life's work. But I was not scared so much, feeling I sort of knew you personally, and what wonderful ideals you had, just like mine. I still wish you had been in your office that morning, Mr. Rodney. If you had talked to me and seen what kind of man I was, and how I felt about service and everything you talked about in your speech at the Y that night, why, last Friday you would have remembered me and you would have not fired me without giving me a chance to finish what I was saying. It is sort of tough, being fired from your job when you have given seven years of the best that is in you. Well, anyhow, that other fellow had me sign the blanks, and see the doctor from the insurance company. And that doctor said I was sound as a dollar all over! And they sent me out on the training-car right off the bat.

I guess maybe you never knew that the guy that took me out on the training-car said he had never seen anyone catch onto things so quick?

Well, now I will have to tell you some of the things about Herb, my wife's brother. Every time Bert and I are happy, he and this wife of his come over and spoil it for us. They try to. To show you, here is what he said that time when I first got my job with the Company. "This guy Rodney hasn't got any of those ideals he talks about," he said. "He made

that speech because the company needs some men right now and they sent him out to get them. That is what a personnel manager is for," Herb says. I mean, that is how he is all the time. Like when I am working on the early shift on the J line and have to get up at 4 A. M. I do not mind it. I know it is the fellows that are willing to put themselves out, that get the merit marks and raises and promotions. But then Herb and Hotsy will come over to see us, and he will say: "Well, Ollie, Bert tells me you are rolling out of bed at 4 A. M. nowadays."

"That is right," I will say. "I do not mind."

"Why don't you get yourself a real job, like the kind I grab off for myself, where a man can sleep late in the morning?" he will ask.

I am never one to complain, Mr. Rodney. Over the bureau in our bed-room I have a poem that I cut out of the Clarion-Gazette, by a poet, that is called It's The Man With The Smile That Wins. And on the wall I have a card, The Best Advice Is From The Firm Of Grin And Barrett. But that is Herb's attitude. He has no background. He is just ignorant, and does not know anything about loyalty or service or vision. One week he is selling real-estate, and the next stock in fake oil wells, and the next washing-machines; one week he is broke and the week after he makes some money and spends every cent of it. He will end up selling lead-pencils on the street, that is what Herb will do! And he and this wop wife of his have the gall to try to tell Bertha and me how to live, that have our little home nearly paid for and not afraid to look any man in the eye! Or like last Xmas, when I was working extra shifts. He and Hotsy came over to see us, and they would say things like, "Well, Ollie, I guess you will not be taking Bert to the dances down to the Odd Fellows', will you?"

"I don't mind," Bertha will say. "Ollie has his future to think of. Ollie has vision."

Bert is no fool. She knows I am cut out to make a big success. She was a leader, herself, when we was at school. But then, after Herb and Hotsy go, I will hear Bertha crying at night when she thinks I am asleep but when I am really laying awake planning how to give better service to our Company. I am always doing little things extra, like helping old

ladies with bundles and things like that; I was trying to tell you about some of the extra things I do, last Friday when you told me to get out of your office. But I mean, Bertha is a game little sport, but I know she is thinking about those dances. I mean, all her friends will be there, and they will be saying, "Oh, Ollie and Bertha are not here. I guess Ollie is ashamed of her and does not want to take her out." I am not ashamed of my little wife! Sometimes when I am reading the Sunday rotogravure section I look at the pictures and say to myself, "Gee, I could have gone to New York and made a lot of money on Wall St. and married one of those society girls." But then I say to myself, "No sir, you stay right here in Riverside, with this sweet moral little wife of yours, and be thankful." No, Mr. Rodney, when I am rich I want to have my Bert right alongside with me, that has shared all my early struggles. But when Herb and Hotsy say things like that it makes Bert feel bad. She is crazy about dancing. I am a pretty good dancer if I do say so. We always win the cups down to the Odd Fellows. After all, we are pretty young. I still have my future ahead of me, and, if the Riverside St. Ry. Co. does not want me, why, maybe some other big corporation will. Maybe you will be sorry you fired me, some day. Ha Ha. But I tell you, there are times when I would like to take that Herb out in the alley and knock some of the sarcasm and bolshevism out of him. It is enough to make any right-minded man sick to his stomach. Only he is my wife's brother, and I have a weak heart from my mother's side of the family, and anyway fighting is no thing for a gentleman to do. If there is anything my parents brought me up to be, before they passed on to their reward, it is a gentleman. Maybe that is why the passengers on the J line are so crazy about me. I guess some of them will feel pretty sore about my being fired. Maybe some of them will quit using the street-car and start riding on the busses, you can't tell.

You can see what it does, Herb razzing me in front of Bertha all the time. He does it behind my back, too. Why, would you believe it, one time he told Bertha he wanted her to get a divorce, because I did not have brains enough to ever make any big money! I found out about it from a friend of mine that is going with a girl that is one of Hotsy's

girl-friends. Of course the things he says do not bother me. I guess no poor excuse for a success like Herb can dominate anyone with my strength of character. All the fortune-tellers I have ever went to have told me I am a master of men. Of course a man with my education does not believe in fortune-tellers, but it is funny they should all say the same thing; I wonder why they do? I have developed myself all along all lines by studying such books like Power Of Will and How To Dominate Others. So I do not give a darn for Herb and his dirty anarchistic talk. But you are a married man, Mr. Rodney, and you know how women are weak. For a long time I did not notice anything out of the way. Then about two years ago I guess it was, Bertha began acting kind of different towards me. I tell you, that no-account brother of hers undermined her morals, that is what he did! For instance, the night I am thinking of, Herb was over to the house and I showed him my books.

"Now all you have to do is go out and dominate someone," he says. "Gee, Ollie, the jack you have wasted on those books, you could have taken Bert down to dance at the Bon Ton every night for six months."

Well, after Herb went home, Bertha says to me: "Honey, don't buy any more books, will you?"

"Well, gee, if I am ever going to be a big executive, Bert, like you want me to be," I said, "I have to educate myself, don't I?"

"But Herb says they are silly."

"What does he know about things like this?" I ask her. "He is nothing but a drifter, living from hand to mouth."

Bertha stamps her foot. "He makes twice as much money as you do, even if he hardly ever does work! That dress Hotsy had on cost forty dollars." And then she begins to cry. "Oh, Ollie, I know you are going to be a big executive some day, but I want to have some fun now, like other married couples do."

Well, Mr. Rodney, I guess that was the worst shock in my life, Bert saying that. I saw Herb was getting her to be just like him and Hotsy. Herb is always reading a magazine about how fellows get lucky breaks and make millions without doing a lick of work; and he is always shooting craps and playing cards and talking about his luck. I felt like I didn't

have a friend left in the world. I mean, that is why I got married, because my folks had passed on, and when a man has no one in the world he gets sort of shiftless and is not a success. Here I wanted to be a success all for Bert's sake, and she paid me back by falling into ways of wrong thinking, and acting like I was the one that was wrong. I do not want to say anything against my wife, for she is one of the finest; but she is one of the weaker sex.

Once I came right out and said to Herb: "Herb, I do not like to say this, but I wish you and Hotsy would not come over here any more."

Well, you would think a man would at least be respected in his own home, but do you know what Herb said? He said: "Say, listen, you little shrimp, Bert is my sister, and I'll come over here as much as I darn please!" I mean, Herb knows I dominate him, and he is jealous of me. I guess he is afraid that wife of his will fall for me. As if I would have her as a gift! He knows if I did not want to take any of those names he calls me I could just hand him a good sock on the chin and there would be only two blows struck, I would strike him and he would strike the floor, ha ha. But he knows I have this weak heart from my mother's side, and do not want to start any trouble because he is Bertha's brother, and so he takes advantage of it. Oh, he is clever, all right. A lot it will ever get him! I am not little. I am five foot eight, and some of the greatest captains of industry in this country are that height. I have a nose that looks like Abraham Lincoln, too. It shows how dominating and aggressive I am. A book of mine named Character Reading At Sight says so.

Other times, when she is away from Herb's immoral influence, Bertha is just the same sweet little girl I married. She will snuggle up to me, and say, "Oh, Ollie, I know you will be a big wonderful success some day! You are fifty times more wonderful than Herb. Herb just gets the breaks, that is all."

"Listen, honey," I try to teach her, "don't talk about breaks. It is perseverance, and loyalty, and ideals, and service that gets a man up to the top."

"Yes, I know," she will say, but a man has to make people notice him. You are better than Herb, but who is going to know it unless you

tell them about it yourself? Herb pushes his way into the bosses' offices and tells them all about how wonderful he is. You are too modest, Ollie."

Well, that is true, Mr. Rodney. I have always been too modest. And the way Bert put it, it began to sound like she might be right about some of it after all. This is just about a year ago, that I am talking about now. I mean, you have read the lives of great business men, and they all say that you have to be aggressive, and sell yourself. Bertha would say, "Of course you are giving wonderful service to the passengers. But think how many conductors Mr. Rodney has to keep track of. How can he know about you? It's up to you to tell him, Ollie!" Well, you know, I'd never thought about it in just that light before; I sort of figured you knew all about me. For instance, a lot of folks on the J line will wait until I come along, and not ride on any other car but mine. I read your wonderful inspiring articles every month in Trainmen's Topics, about giving service, and I guess they just mean more to me than they do to the other fellows. Why, some of the cons and motormen even laugh at those articles of yours! And they are working for you right today, while here I am fired! Herb used to work for an advertising agency once, and he tried to tell me that our Trainmen's Topics bought those articles already in print, from a place that writes them in New York; but I out and called him a liar to his face, the bolshevik! No, sir, I knew I was doing work to be proud of, and I figured you knew I was too; only when Bertha began to talk like that, about your being so busy, why, it struck me maybe she was right, and maybe that was why I had not been promoted in seven years like I expected to be.

"Gee, Bert," I would say, "nothing will ever happen to make Mr. Rodney notice me. I had just better count on good steady work, and wonderful service, and living up to our Company's ideals, like I am doing."

"No," she would say, "we are going to get a break. We have been waiting for one for seven years, so the Lord only knows we ought to get one soon now."

Well, that is how she got around me, Mr. Rodney—talking kidding-like, like that, and acting sweet and cute. This is just a couple of months

or so ago I am talking about now. Well, I am ashamed to say it, but I guess she talked me into it. I never thought anything like she said would happen, though. The best of us are weak at times, the philosopher says, and pride comes before a fall. Right when I expected nothing would happen, it happened! When I came into your office last Friday, I thought you knew about it, but it seems like you did not, so I will tell you just how it happened. Thursday I came home from work just like always, not knowing anything. At the corner I ran into my next-door neighbor, and he said, "Well, I guess you won't be speaking to us any more, will you, now you're famous?" I just grinned, thinking he was kidding. But when I got into the house, Bertha ran and kissed me, her eyes just like two stars. "Oh, Ollie, isn't it wonderful, isn't it wonderful?" she kept saying, over and over. "Oh, I have phoned Hotsy, and she and Herb are coming over right after supper!" Well, I guess you could have knocked me over with a feather when she showed me the clipping. I just happened to find it when I opened my coin-purse a minute ago, here in Bridgeport, so I will give it to you word for word right out of the Clarion-Gazette. Here it is, just like it was in the paper Bert showed me:

> Patsy left home that morning on feet as light as sunbeams. Beneath her jaunty little hat her eyes were bright as sunbeams, too. All the flowers along Ridge Street seemed to smile at her, and all the trees to whisper tender secrets into her little pink ears. For had not Hobart Pennington taken her into his strong arms, last night, far out on the Daley Pike in his luxurious coupe, and told her that he loved her with all his heart and soul? Hobart, with the romantic touch of grey at the temples! Hobart, for whom she had been until yesterday just a pretty, efficient secretary! Hobart, the man she had loved in secret these many, many moons! And now—Hobart. Hobart. To her. Hers, to love and cherish. And because she herself was so happy, Patsy noticed the happy face of the handsome young conductor on the street-car she took to work. His number was 432, she read from his cap. He was another happy mortal—Mr. 432—who had learned the secret of love! Patsy exclaimed to herself, with a little wriggle of ecstacy.

It is a story that is called "The Sunshine Girl Of Riverside," that is running every day in the Clarion-Gazette. When Herb came over that

night, he said, "It is a syndicate story. It is written in New York, but they fix it so whatever town it is printed in it looks like it is written about that town. All that stuff about Ridge Street and the Daley Pike was put in here." I mean, Herb is jealous of me, and he couldn't see anything as wonderful as being mentioned in the paper happen to me without making at least one nasty crack about it. But a minute later he said, "Gee, this is a real break for you, Ollie. I sure hope you follow it up."

Hotsy says: "You have got about ten thousand dollars worth of free publicity for yourself and the Riverside St. Ry. Co!"

Herb goes on, "Say, Ollie, when you go down ask Mr. Rodney for a promotion, now, it will be a cinch."

And Bertha keeps saying, "Oh, honey, I told you it would happen!"

I can not tell you all the things those three said to me, Mr. Rodney. Herb and Hotsy stayed till after midnight. I thought they were actually being nice to me, for the first time in their lives. More fool me! Even with all that, I guess I would have had sense enough not to come down to your office the way I did, except for all the things that happened the next morning. I mean, all morning the passengers that got on my car kept looking at me and whispering to each other. Some of them that knew me well come right out and said, "Well, Ollie, I see you got in the paper!" Others kept smiling at me and whispering to each other, like I say. I knew they were all talking about me. I guess that was the last straw, that made me do it. I guess I was just conceited. I am sure sorry, now.

I guess you remember the rest of what happened, all right, Mr. Rodney, so there is no use in my telling it to you. The girl let me into your office, and I started talking to you. You looked sort of different than I remembered you, it being so long since I had seen you. I guess maybe that is why I got so rattled. I am sorry I tripped over the edge of the rug and knocked down that big expensive ash-tray. Oh, Mr. Rodney, I see how crazy it was of me, now; honest I do!—sitting on your desk and slapping you on the back, like my wife said her brother did; and telling you I would not take anything less than an executive position in the office with you. When you told me to stop pawing you, and stop shouting, cross my heart and hope to die I did not have any idea I was

pawing you and shouting! Oh, I was a fool. I know it now. It was all the fault of those three people, working on me the way they did. I am not like that. If you will ask anyone that knows me, any of the fellows at the car barns or any passenger that rides on the J line, they will all tell you I am not conceited. Give me another chance, Mr. Rodney! Give me a chance to show you I am not like that. Even the best of us make mistakes.

Well, you told me I was fired. The next thing I knew, I was out on the street. I have never had such a blow in my life. I walked up Main Street a ways, and then I saw a Bridgeport bus just leaving, and I could not go home and face Bertha, and I got on it, and here I am. I have been here at this Elco Hotel in Bridgeport since Friday afternoon. And so Herb has got me fired, and split up with Bertha, just like he has always wanted. Oh, yes, I see all that now. And so now you know the whole thing, just like it has happened from the very start seven years ago, and I leave it to you if you ought to hire me back. You are a fair and square American, and I leave if to you it you think I have been treated unfair and have had hard luck. I will leave it all to you, Mr. Rodney. Whatever you say will be all right with me. It was Sunday I got the idea of writing you this letter, and Monday I went over to the Secretarial School across the street and this young lady here said she would type it for me. I wanted it to be typewritten so it would be easy to read and I will not take any of your valuable time from the affairs of our Company. This young lady here, Miss Dixie Angel, says she will type all this tonight, as a special favor, and bring it to me down here to the hotel on her way to school tomorrow morning. It is mighty nice of her to help me this way.

Well, Mr. Rodney, I guess that is all. I will leave everything to you. I just wanted you to know the whole story, so you can see your way clear to do whatever you think is right. There is a mail train out of here tomorrow morning at ten, so you ought to get this tomorrow afternoon.

Yrs. Respectfully,

Oliver L. Smith, No. 432.

* * *

I am writting this on in pencil because there are somethings too sacredd for others to see, Oh Mr. Rodney I never knew till I seen this

whole letter together how long it would be, 14 pages, and I am scairt you will not read all of it, oh Mr. Rodney please read it! Even if you are busy you ougt to read it by Thursday and I have an anser by Friday, I only had my pay check when I come here and it is almost all spent but I will get threw somehow till Saturday and wait tell then, oh if I don't hear from you by Friday I will kill myself I swear I will kill myself. Or I will go away to Cincinnati and get a job there and Riverside the town where I was born will never see me more, and my own little wife will never see my face again. Oh Mr. Rodney I can't face her after this and she thought I would come home with a wonderful position in the office with you, Oh my God I cant face her or let that Herb and Hotsy have the laugh on me. Oh Mr. Rodney please give me my job back, please, I will even be a track-walker and not a con, I do not care, I will tell Bert something or other and make her believe it, only take me back, Mr. Rodney, give me another chance! Please read this letter through to the end and don't just think it is to long and not read it, oh for God's sake. Oh in the name of our Saviour please take me back, please, please!!!

POOR WHITE TRASH

by

Mattingly Spalding

The jitney rattled to a stop down on the side street of the little town. It was a model T Ford, painted red, and minus accessories like a hood and the two rear fenders, the absence of which gave the car no shape at all, but the appearance of a hungry skeleton, all deformed and humped up by the load it carried. One rocking chair was tied on the left front fender, another on the rear end; and the rattle-trap quivered all over like a broken beast, under its burden, and coughed, as the motor was shut off.

A dust and sweat dirtied man climbed out over the door by the wheel and walked round to the other side of the car. At the same time a small boy appeared, a small boy with the same littered look as the man. He seemed just to appear from nowhere, because the car could not hold him. In the front seat a woman and baby took up all the room and a scraggly woman in a big, shapeless red hat emerged from under the debris of weathered baskets, ragged clothes, and broken boxes in the rear.

The boy stood leaning on the car as the man spoke.

"What you a-wanten in the stores?.·. I reckon hit's a thing to eat?"

"Maybe something to eat and maybe hit's other things ...but all the good fer a-wanten, maybe I won't be a-gitten!" the woman in the front seat snapped. Her voice was strained and cracked and she was brown and weather-worn by the wind, which beat dirt into her skin and left a line of red on her chest above the sagging front of her faded print dress. The child in her arms was limp.

"Hit's a thing to eat we have to git, and little money we have to fotch it... You know that."

"Kin I holp it!... Hit's 'loney sausage I be a-wanten, and crackers fer the baby. You know he won't nurse... What you a-wanten, Mel?" She

turned her head slightly toward the other woman.

Mel fingered in her pocketbook, unloading it and dragging out a ragged purse.

"'Loney fer me, too."

The man took money from both women, jerked the boy from the side of the car, and grumbled as the two plod up the street.

"And you better had git something this time..." he threatened the boy.

"Luck to both!" the woman in the front seat called, throwing back her head in a shrill, soured laugh. Then she opened her mouth, exposing two long front teeth set far apart and she put her tongue under them and spat fiercely like a man, with a hissing noise. There was a splatter upon the ground. She was a young woman, very young but large and battered into maturity.

The other woman sat still, then uncovered her lap under a basket.

The baby came alive, whined, and pulled himself to a sitting position by jerking at the front of the young woman's dress.

She looked pityingly at the child.

"Hit shames me to sit here and see them red health spots a-goen from his cheeks. Ifen we don't git a place pretty soon, he'll leave us, and that's a fact... Hit shames me sure to see what the world's come to... No work, nothin fer folks even a-willen to work... Kaintuck ain't no place fer sich, never to-fore..."

She bared one breast for the child, but he just whined and burst into crying, beating at the breast and refusing to take it in his mouth.

"He just won't take to nursen... Hit shames me..."

"Ifen Lylie hadn't a-tooken with fit spells, you wouldn't a-had to leave mammy's," the other woman complained.

"Yes, and she stay to bed so long as mammy wait on her..."

Paper rustled as Mel moved her feet, and she pulled an oil-paper sack from the floor.

"What's this-here, Lissy?" She handed it to the front seat.

"Wait till I make this scrapegoat quit his devilment," and Lissy covered her breast before taking the bag... "Them's tater chips. Don't

you know what tater chips is? ...See, P-O-T-A-T-O C-H-I-P-S," she spelled the letters out, "tater chips is what it spells. Eat 'em." She offered the sack to the woman.

"Naw, I have tobaccy in my mouth." Mel spat through her stained teeth, in the same direction the other woman had. "Hit's as I tell you," she continued whining as she fingered at a hole in the top of the car, "...ifen Lylie hadn't a-tooken none of us would a-been turned out like this..."

The other woman broke in. "...and this brat wouldn't be a-losen his color and health... No work, nothin fer folks even a-willen to work."

Both women lapsed into silence, but continued their spitting at intervals. The baby whined, settled back into the crook of Lissy's arm, and was quiet.

After a time, the man and boy plodded toward the car, bearing sacks and a melon.

"I got this..." the boy carelessly held up the melon, "tooken it while he buyed the 'loney... Wasn't no trouble." He spoke listlessly, without concern, and without consciousness of guilt. Then he disappeared on the other side of the car—disappeared as he had come.

The man gave out the sacks, walked around to the steering wheel, and fumbled with the switch. Then he went to the fore and set to cranking. The motor coughed again, as it had done before its rest, and the man climbed in.

"Where we a-goen, now?" the woman with the child groaned.

"Who knows...?" his words trailed off into mumblings as the car started off and the woman in the back seat braced herself up, stiff and straight. The boy must have been there, too, perhaps huddled on the running board on the other side.

RED BALL

by

L. A. G. Strong

MR. Spaddacott gloomily eyed the leave, bent down, straightened up again, grunted, shifted his position, and finally let drive with a force which only the very experienced, or the very inexperienced, would dare apply upon the village table. His ball, careering madly round, missed an impossible cannon by at least two feet. I got ready to follow.

"'Old 'ard," he cautioned me, with uplifted hand, still anxiously watching the balls. "Let 'em develop. Let 'em develop."

And, sure enough, his ball, approaching a corner with the last of its momentum, fell into the well-worn track, and dropped exhausted into the pocket.

"Aaaah," exclaimed the veteran, with satisfaction. "A development."

And he proceeded to score seven more points.

I offered no comment. "Developments" were a legitimate part of the game of billiards as played upon the village table. The entire neighbourhood would have been, not so much indignant, as bewildered, had any outsider poured scorn upon such a method of remaining in play. If you could see no direct shot, you hit out, hoping to bring one of the balls near one or other of the two top pockets. If not travelling too fast, it might accede to a slight gradient, and roll in. Points thus gained Mr. Spaddacott had always called developments, and the name stuck. There was much to be said for his view, for, after all, the law of gravity worked both ways, and many a promising break was cut short by the premature and unsought disappearance of an opponent's ball. On Mr. Spaddacott's table, as on many golf-courses, local knowledge was exceedingly valuable. t was an accepted law, in all inter-village contests, that the home team won.

My knowledge of the table at no time equalled Mr Spaddacott's. Besides, I had not played upon it for eighteen months, during which

time certain characteristics had become accentuated, and the dead cushion (a comparative title) had been renewed. Hence I could make no answer to the sparkling fourteen amassed by my adversary. Recollections of the right hand top pocket stood me in good stead for three long losers; but it was no good. Mr. Spaddacott, with a series of developments which for once deserved the word sensational, rattled out a winner, by no less than thirty-seven points.

"You'm short o' practice," he observed.

"Yes," I replied. "But I haven't had to go and fetch up the ball from below, anyway."

"Ah." He sucked his teeth. "Very impetuous, you used to be. Very 'eadstrong with the cue."

Mr. Spaddacott's table, centre and chief ornament of the village club, was situated in a loft above a disused stable. One gained access to the loft by a ladder, and the floor was very uneven. It was easy, for a number of reasons, to knock the ball off the table. Expert players, trying to show off: over-zealous youths, in quest of developments: persons failing to notice that one of the cushions suffered in places from a depressed lip: purists who stood the red ball in the hole it had worn over the spot, instead of on the nearest suitable edge of sound cloth: all such were liable to send one of the balls shooting off on the floor, whence, unless smartly retrieved, it headed straight for the opening and fell into the stable below, necessitating an adjournment, lantern in hand, before the game could be resumed. For this reason, there was always a coating of straw laid all about the foot of the ladder, to protect the balls from injury.

I picked up the balls, and turned them over in my hand.

"Several of these marks must be due to me," I said. "Hullo. That's a good chip out of the red ball. That's since my day?"

Mr. Spaddacott adjusted his glasses, and peered.

"No," he said. "Done years back, that was."

"Was it? I don't remember noticing it before."

"'Twas so, all same."

"Must have been at the very start, before you had the straw down."

"No. No. 'Twasn't done in the stable at all."

He paused, and rubbed his nose.

"'Twas against the corner of the fireplace over yonder, that was done," he said.

"How on earth! The man must have hit like a bull. It's yards away."

"Come on along in here. I see the missus have left some tea for us: come in along, and I'll tell 'ee the pedigree of it."

He led the way into his little inner room, and there, while we took tea, recited the following history.

There's been many strange happenings have took place on this here table, from the match against Bittacombe when the last pair in the decidin' game had only one point to go, and each went to table seven times without scorin', till our chap hits the ball off the table and gives away the game, to the evenin' when Harry Tozer made a break of eighty-one and another of seventy-eight same time his wife was home dyin', and he wouldn't leave the table, not for all the messages that came, till he'd runned out a winner, and her'd runned out to a better land, poor soul, and a happy release 'twas from the cold-blidded, callous, limpin' toad—that I should so miscall a fellow creature.

"Get out," he says, to each one that come with a message. "I haven't been in form like this, not for a year and more. Her'll bide till I come," he calls after the last messenger. There's a thing, now. A poor woman layin' 'pon her deathbed, callin' out for her man, and he playin' billiards. Well. There 'twas. A happy release.

But, as I was sayin', not even that there wasn't the strangest thing us have witnessed 'pon this here table. Matter of eight year ago, there was livin' up top the road by the blacksmith's a girl by the name of Gertie Exworthy. Big girl she was, big and well carryin', with a freckledly nose, and a lot of fair hair. She wasn't what you might call a beauty, but—there, well, you know what I mean. There was more than one, what it come into his head how 'twould feel to put a arm round her waist and sot beside her of a nice evenin' in the rise of the year: and, of they what thought so much, there was two in whose 'eads the idea sticked for a long time.

Harry Munday, a dark, good lookin' sort of a chap, summat wild, but very generous 'earted, was one: Samuel Toop, a bit more steady-goin' like, a good, decent, sizeable young fella, was another. Well, 'twas the old old story, over again, like. Each of 'em was after her: one offered the better promise of matrimony, with his chapel-goin' and his steady ways —not that he was one of these here dull, psalm-singin', mingey sort, mind 'ee: 'tother offered more excitement. Well, Gertie Exworthy, her didn' know which to favour: so her favoured the both. Her wouldn' commit herself to no promise, and her wouldn' say her liked one no better than the other: so there 'twas. Gertie wasn't a calculatin' one, and her didn' play off Harry against Sam, nor yet Sam against Harry. Her just couldn' rightly decide. A warm, affectionate sort of a girl, and never one to make a move till her was prodded.

Well, before long, the rivelary of these two for Gertie Exworthy become the talk of the neighbourhood. First her was out with one, then with 'tother. Samuel bein' a baker, and Harry workin' for Mr. Sanders, up to The Gables, they was off different times: so 'twas boxin' Cox, like, as the sayin' is, for a while. But soon Gertie Exworthy took a situation with Mrs. Legassick—you remember she? Dead this four year—and didn't have but the one evenin' out a week. That caused so much trouble her couldn't keep the situation but five weeks, and her father up and spoke his mind very bitter on the subjick.

"Well," says Harry, dogged like, when Mr. Exworthy do bring the matter home to en in here one evenin'. "Let her choose," he says, "and us won't have no more foolishness."

This here was Mr. Exworthy's own private, personal opinion, and many a blawin' up he'd gived the girl, same purpose: but it didn' please him none the better to hear it from Harry.

"Why *should* her chose," he said. "Why *should* her. If you two would only leave the poor maid bide, 'stead of turrifyin' her like this here, us could have some peace."

"Oh, come, come," says old George Smith, "Come, come," he says. "That 'baint reasonable. 'Tis only in nature for the boys to be after the maid," he says, "and many a man would be only too pleased if 'twas his

maid they was after."

There was a laugh at this here, and Nick Screech, what had got five daughters, all so plain as potato-peelin's, made wise his bootlace had come undoed.

Mr. Exworthy went to see Sam after that, but Sam didn' fall in with his views no better. Sam was on the high tide of his righteous passions, and wouldn' agree to nothin'. Savin' only one thing, that is how 'twas ridicklus for Harry to be after the maid, so well as himself.

So affairs dragged on, and Gertie still doed her best to run in double harness, like. Mind, her wasn't in no way flirty-gibbet. Her liked the both of 'em, and jus' couldn' make up her mind to give up one of 'em for 'tother. When it come to her walkin' down to church Sunday mornin', with one on each side of her: Harry so black as pitch, and Sam like a stuffed bullick—well, then, folks reckoned 'twas a open scandal, and somethin' should be done to put a end to it. "Somethin' should be done," they kep' sayin', "Somethin' should be done:" but, when it come to sayin' what the somethin' was, their tongues sticked back in their heads.

"I moves," says old George Smith at last, "I moves us consults Reverend Le Vernon Battishill."

There was a bit of a silence, for Reverend Le Vernon, as you well know, wasn't our parson, but incumbent on Stoke Dendle. Still, he was famed in all parts as a man of high resource: and no one wouldn't never have thought of consulting Reverend Pethybridge 'pon so much as settin' a mousetrap. If he hadn't took notice of the tryo, all three together in the front poo, right under his nose, where he got up to preach, he wouldn't be likely to have noticed 'em elsewhere. All same, there was some to argy the point, as there always will be when several be congregated together in one place.

"Get out," says George to 'em. "Disloyalty my—," he says. "You know very well us have been over to consult Reverend Battishill half a dozen times," he says, "and with the full approval of Reverend Pethybridge," he says, "so why not now?" he says.

Wherefore, presently, after a little more tell, 'twas carried unanimous by all to consult Reverend Le Vernon Battishill 'pon how to make a girl

decide which of two chaps her didn' want to lose. Next, they had to elect a deppitation, to go over and acquaint Reverend Battishill with the point at issue: and, what with one thing and another, 'twas a fortnight past before the deppitation could all be assembled together to keep the appointment what the Reverend Battishill had been able to make. That's the first and only point about deppitations and suchlike in these parts—to choose chaps what can all get off to do their deppitising same time: and 'tis the last what ever occurs to their 'eads. Be-as-'twill, deppitation consulted Reverend Le Vernon Battishill in doo form. Spokesman, Joe Frapwell, had made up a fine speech: but before he'd been goin' a minute Reverend Battishill asked en two questions, and got in possession of the whole matter.

"Well," he says. "What do you want me to do?"

"Ack," says Joe, very dramatic like.

"What?" says Reverend.

"Ack. Take action, like," says Joe.

"I see," says Reverend. "Well," he says, "I'll see the girl, and then I'll see the two men. That's all I can promise."

He gived 'em a glass of cider all round, same as he always do, and had 'em outside the house in ten minutes: but, such is the high faith us —they all had in the Reverend Le Vernon Battishill, they all looked to one another, in relief, like, and felt "Now 'tis sure to be all right."

Well, Reverend Battishill seen Gertie Exworthy, and he couldn' get nothing out of she: though her did allow, after 'twas all over, that he'd put the most searchin' questions to her 'bout which of the two her'd prefer. Come to blush, her did, speakin' of it. But he couldn' get no decision out 'of er; so he send for Harry and Sam.

They came all right, but not wi' too good a grace, particular on Harry's part. 'Twasn't none of their choosin' to consult Reverend Battishill.

"Now, you two," he says, "the maid can't choose, and I'm bound to say I don't see why her should: but your neighbours are all worried about it, and I daresay the whole business has put you in a very awkward position."

"That's right," says Sam, lookin' severe at Harry.

"Oh," says Harry, "you needn't pull your face across at me. I know you reckon you're the only one in it," he says, "and I know you reckon your money and your godly ways be goin' to prevail. But—"

"Hush, now," says Reverend Battishill. "There's no call to argue. Do you want the matter settled?" he asks Sam.

"Yes," says Sam.

"And you, Munday?"

"Yes. One way or the other."

"Very well, then. How shall us decide?" He put his hand in his pocket. "Shall us toss for it?"

"Reverend!" exclaims Sam, shocked like.

"You object?" Reverend seemed to be surprised, and Harry, though he grinned to see Sam, didn't act like he favoured it neither.

"I do," says Sam. "Strong. 'Tisn't seemly."

"Might be a bit rough on the maid, if her heard of it," says Harry, with a sort of a shrug, sittin' forward, his elbows on his knees, and lookin' up at Reverend Battishill.

"That's a point, certainly," says Reverend. "Well, what do *you* suggest?"

"I wondered," said Sam, "if you was to ask Guidance, p'raps..."

"Get out, man," says Reverend. "Have sense. You've just refused to leave it to Providence," he says.

"What!" says Sam. "You call the spin of a coin—*Providence?*"

"My dear Toop," says Reverend. "If Providence be concerned to see that one of you gets Miss Exworthy, It can speak in the spin of a coin as well as by any other means. It has her to consider, you know, as well as you two. What next then? Will you fight for her?"

"'Twouldn't be fair," says Sam. "Harry would beat me easy. He can box."

"I couldn't take advantage of the man," says Harry.

"H'm," says Reverend, and he gives a good sharp look at Harry, who was lookin' down at the floor. "Well, if 'tis to be neither chance nor skill," he says, "we're up against a difficult proposition. Very difficult."

He stops for a minute, and then, "I've got it," he says. "You two chaps play billiards, I know."

"Yes," they both says, lookin' at him blank.

"And you're much of a match, for I seen you down to the Memorial Hall, when your chaps played ours."

"Yes: but—"

"And you've got a new table in your village—at least, new to you."

"That's right. Three quarter size."

"Well, it's not new to me," says Reverend Battishill. "I've played on it often, at George Hatherleigh's," he says, "and I reckon 'tis ideal for the purpose. Half skill, half act of God. That ought to satisfy you, Toop," he says. "'Twill give Providence plenty of chance to take a hand."

"Yes, but," says Sam bewildered, "I don't see—"

"Get out," says Harry. "Reverend here wants us to play a match on our table, the winner to get Gertie. Isn't that right, sir?"

Reverend Le Vernon Battishill nodded, lookin' from one of 'em to 'tother.

"Well," says Harry, drawin' breath, and sittin' up in his chair, "I be game."

"What do you say, Toop?"

"'Tisn't hardly seemly," says Sam, slow like. "'Tisn't hardly seemly, playin' a sportin' game for so serious a matter."

"'Tisn't hardly seemly, the state of things at present," puts in Harry. "And us can't think of no better way to end the matter."

So, after a little more objectin' on the part o' Sam, 'twas covenanted and ordained that Harry Munday and Samuel Toop do play a level game o' two hundred and fifty up, winner to have Gertie Exworthy in the bands o' holy wedlock.

When the evenin' came for the game to take place, you couldn't hardly get into the yard outside, for the crush of people. Word had spread through all the four parishes and beyond, and all sorts had turned up for to witness the proceedin's.

That caused trouble. All here felt 'twas our affair, and no one else's. But there—you couldn't keep the news of such a unusual performance

secret in the countryside. 'Twould be bound to get about, and chaps would want to see the fun. That's only in human nature, like.

Harry and Sam didn' put in a appearance till near before the game was due to start, and when Harry seen the crowd all waitin' round, he went so black as thunder.

"Hullo," calls a chap from another parish, catchin' sight of the pair. "Here be the two heroes who be goin' to do battle for the bride. How be feelin', eh?"

Harry scowls at him.

"What brings you here?" he asks, very quiet and black.

"Oh, cooriosity, cooriosity," says the chap. "The marriage customs of other folks is always interestin'," he says.

"How's your cue, Harry?" shouts another chap, before Harry could answer.

"How's his summat else, more like," calls another, and a gert laugh goes up from all around.

Harry took no notice. He was still scowlin' at the chap what'd spoke first.

"I don't know what you reckon you're doing here, Saul Brickford," he says, "but you and your rabble had better clear out. We don't want you."

"Oho," says Saul. "What—ain't I invited to the party? That's *too* bad," he says, "because I'm stayin', all the same."

"As you please," says Harry. "There won't be no game till you've gone, that's all."

Well, the situation began to look ugly then, but some of us got hold of Harry, and persuaded him into the building. Sam went quiet enough: he didn't seem to mind. Then we reasoned it out with the other chaps that, so soon as our chaps was all accomodated, we should admit in all of theirs as there was room for. There was a bit of a rush when the time came, and too many got in.

Us had to send a score or more away, for they was crowdin' round the table, and I was feared for the floor. That roused up bad blid again, and some of they what couldn't get in start heavin' pebbles up at the

windows, till George Smith goes out and makes a speech to 'em.

"Look 'ee here," he says. "This be a private meetin' of a private parish club, 'pon private parish business," he says. "'Tidn' a football match, nor a picture show. Have money been took, or posters sticked up in the street?" he says. "Very well, then. How would you fancy it, if strangers was to come pokin' in to your private concerns?" he says.

"Get home with 'ee, you ole mumphead," one chap sings out, and heave a tetty: but the good sense of what George Smith said tooked hold on 'em, and they dispersed off quiet.

Then the game beginned: and I don't think I need to worry 'ee with all the pedigree of the scorin'. 'Twasn't nothing accountable, in the way of play: besides, I can't call much of it to mind. Harry were a dashin' sort of a player, good 'pon his day, and able to bring off a deal of showy strokes if he were in the lead: but no good at all if a chap had a big start of en. Sam were more steady-goin': didn' take no risks, but a good, sound scorer, with his sevens and tens and sucklike: didn' vary much in his play, and hard to beat. Well, be-as-'twill, this evenin', of all others, he couldn' thrive. Harry didn' play very well, but the luck favoured en, and the balls developed well: Sam played steadyish, but missed more'n he caught, and the balls wouldn' do nothin' for en.

"'Ard luck, 'ard luck," chaps would cry to en at first: but soon they settled down and keeped quiet, for reelly, what with the way the game was runnin', it looked like Harry was the man intended to have Gertie Exworthy, and nobody cares to cry out against what will be, like.

Harry passed the two hunnerd a good forty ahead of Sam and then, playin' careless, he let Sam come up. The crowd shouts to en not to act so foolish, and with the same he put on a break of twenty-three, good, honest scorin'. Sam's forehead come out in a sweat, and he bited his lips, but he got down to it, made seven off a poor leave, and layed Harry a double baulk. But nothin' could stop Harry: and his score stood at two hunnerd and forty-one while Sam, starin' anxious at the score board, couldn' see nothin' better than two hunnerd and three.

"Now then, Harry," calls someone, "run out to your bride:" and a easy enough shot was offered, but Harry, after lookin' to it, turns off by

the way to play for somethin' else, and misses his score.

"Gaah," says the chaps all round the room, watchin' with their eyes sticked out.

"He'll lost, yet," says one. "He'm over-confident." And, as if to give the chap right, Sam gets right down, and makes twenty-four. At the close of it, he tries to leave a double baulk again, but hit too ladylike, and leaves the balls sittin': another easy shot for Harry.

"Go on, Harry," Joe Pellow calls out. "Now's your chance. Put down the red, man: put down the red."

Harry straightens up from table, and looks across at him.

"Look here," he says, "Be I playin' this game, or be you?"

"Oh, you, boy," holleys Joe Pellow back. "I don't want to deprive 'ee. I got enough trouble o' me own, home, wi'out addin' to it."

There was a laugh, hushed off short as Harry stooped down again to the table. 'Twas a good shot offered, a easy cannon: but, to the 'mazement of all, Harry, after a good look at it, walks round cool as you like to the other side.

"No," he says, half aloud, "I fancies this better."

With the same, he try some finickin' far-fetched sort of a shot all round the table, and missed.

Sam runs to the table, sort of desperate like, to try and make the most of Harry's mistake, but he losts the white ball, and couldn' do no more than five. Worst of all, he leaves Harry another straight, clean shot. When he turned, and seen how the balls lied, he gived a sort of a groan.

There wasn't but the one shot to try for, this time: a plain in off to the right 'an' toppocket. Harry, a bit set in the face, stoops down, aims very careful, makes a great show of puttin' side on his ball, plays too fine, and miss by inches. Everybody gives a gasp, for 'tis a shot you can't possibly fail to make 'pon this here table, as well you knows providin' you plays gentle.

"'Ere," whispers Lias Clarke to me, "I'll lay he missed that one o' purpose."

I didn' say nothin'. I was watchin' Harry.

"Harry," bawls Lias of a sudden. "Looks like you bain't tryin' to win."

Harry gives him a cool sort of a stare.

"Oh," he says, "It do, do it?"

"Yes," says Lias. "Looks like you don't want the girl."

There was a silence then, if you like. Everyone watched at Harry to see how he'd take it. Samuel, what was just stoopin' to his leave, looked up at him too. Nobody moved.

"Well," says Harry, smilin' to himself in a queer sort of way, and walkin' over to where the chalk was, in the little cup under the table. "I don't know that I do."

"*What?*"

Samuel straightens up upright, and stares at him with his mouth hangin' open.

"What, Harry?" he says. And then, as Harry didn't say nothin', but went on to chalk his cue, "Repeat they words," Sam says.

"I don't know that I do want her," says Harry, lookin' nowhere in particular.

"You—don't—know—that—you—do—want—her," repeats Sam, very slow. Then, seein' Harry smile, he says, quite sharp, "Why for?"

"Because I've had 'er," shouts Harry back, very brutal and sudden, like.

"Because you've had 'er! What—d'ee mean you'm *married* to 'er?"

"No," says Harry. "Without."

"Without. Without. Aaaah, you——." Sam's face went all red and puckered up, and he spitted out some very bad words. "You low, loose-livin'—," he says: and, lookin' around for somethin', he picks up the red ball from the table, and heaves it at Harry's 'ead.

Harry ducks, and the red ball crashes against the fireplace, and trickles along over the floor. The room was so still as death. You could hear the ball rollin', slow at first, then faster and faster, to the trapdoor: but us was all under a spell, like, and no one moved to stop it, till it comed to the door, felled 'pon top one of the steps, and bumped down into the straw below.

Then, in a minute, everyone was speakin' at once. Men runned to hold Sam, but he'd spent hisself. There wasn't no need.

"Well, Sam," says Harry at last, "shall us go on with the game?"

"Game be damned," says Sam. "If her's that sort, *I* don't want her neither."

"Oh, Sam," says Harry, anxious like, comin' round the table, and puttin' his hand on Sam's shoulder. "I don't want you to think that," he says. "I tell 'ee, man—"

"Leave me go," says Sam, shakin' off his hand.

"Well, then, so it ended," said Mr. Spaddacott, lifting the top of the stove, and spitting into its interior. "That's how the chip came on the red ball. Made it up, the two did," he added, "and was good friends ever after, till Harry went away, and Sam married another girl."

"And Gertie—what about her?"

"Married Joe Metherall, the butcher, out to Stoke Dendle. Reverend Le Vernon Battishill married 'em. Steady-goin' a married 'ooman as you could wish to see. Three pretty little maids her've got. Runnin' a bit to fat: but a good wife to the man, and a happy marriage. Well, well. There 'tis you see. Now—have us time for another hunnerd up, afore you go?"

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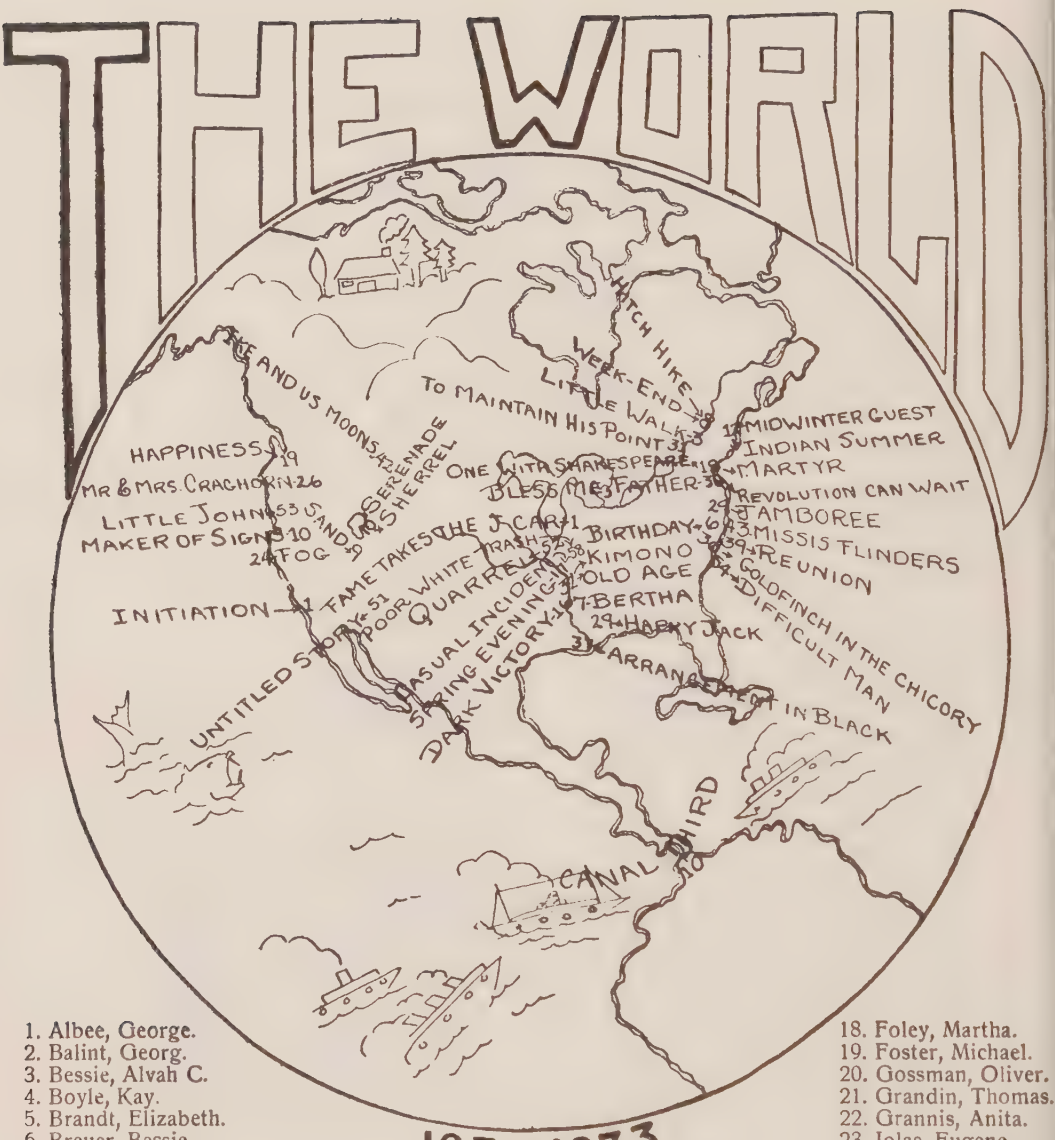

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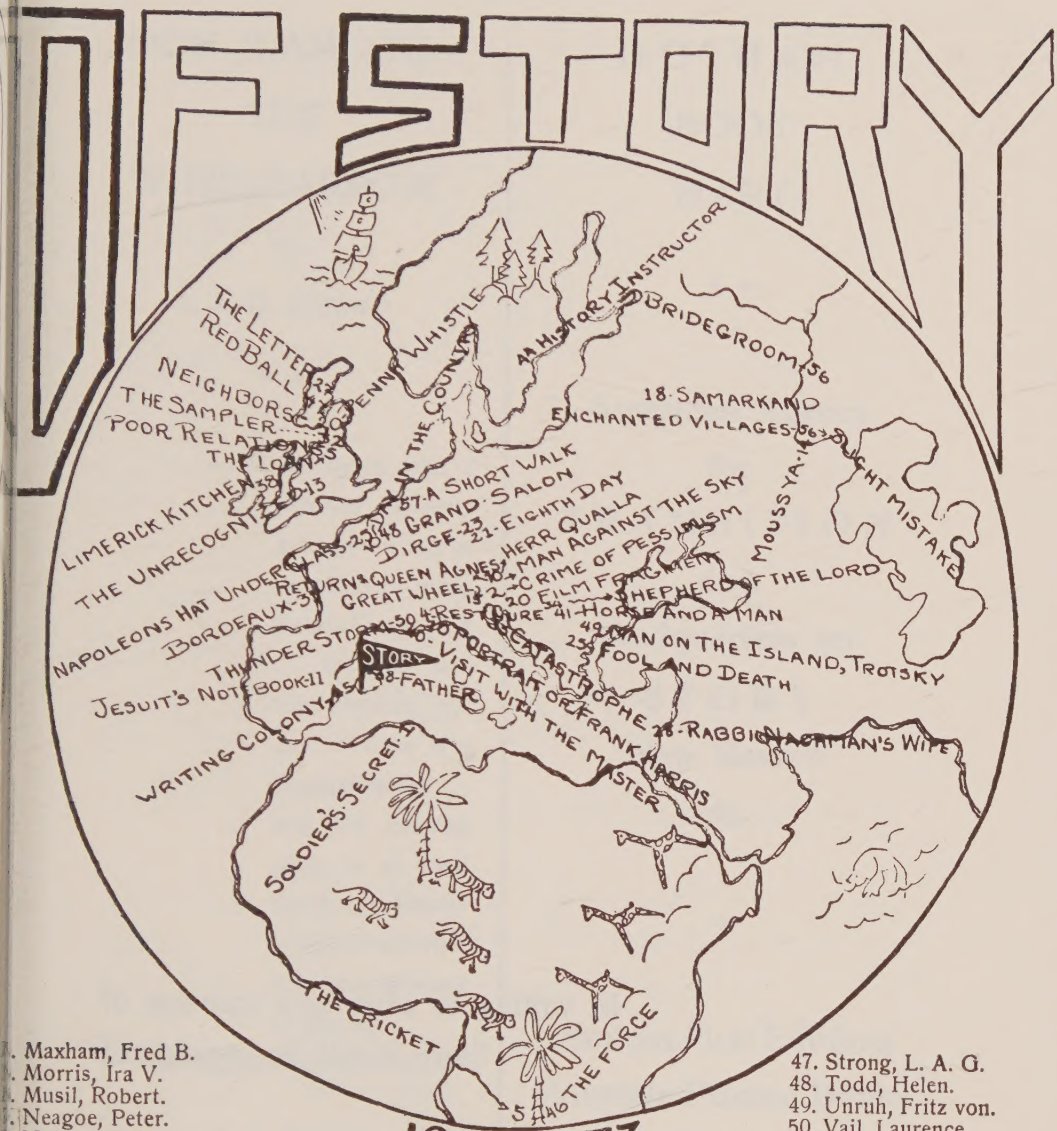

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